



Children and Work Research Series: Session 10

Participatory Action Research and Innovation with Children in the Worst Forms of Child Labour: Methodologies and Learnings

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Register [here](#)

Abstract

The CLARISSA programme, or ‘child labour action research innovation in South and Southeast Asia’, is a ground breaking consortium programme generating innovative solutions for children to avoid hazardous, exploitative labour in Nepal and Bangladesh. Funded by FCDO, with the Institute of Development Studies as the lead partner, and with consortium members including international organisations such as Terre des Homes Federation and Consortium for Street Children, along with several local partners, the actions of all consortium partners are rooted in a respect for the rights of children. CLARISSA takes a participatory, adaptive, and child-centred approach to evidence and innovation generation. Participatory Action Research is the core driver of the programme’s innovations, delivered through a range of interventions with children and communities. The presentation will outline the programme’s central methodologies, and highlight key learnings so far.

Speaker Bio

Marina Apgar is a human ecologist with 20 years experience working directly with marginalised communities in international development across the research-practice divide supporting locally defined development pathways. She has worked extensively with indigenous peoples in Latin America, and collaborated with the Guna people of Panama during her doctoral research that focused on the social and cultural processes that support adaptive capacity for endogenous development of their biocultural territory. Throughout her work, Marina uses a systems approach to participatory action research and is passionate about understanding and facilitating the creative space between research processes and development outcomes through engaging in complex adaptive systems to support emergence.

Breakout Rooms Report

Room 1

Program with bonded labour – recognizing the issue of debt was an issue, so they did a survey on where money was spent: temples and alcoholism.

Questions

How do you move towards child participation? This question applies to all participatory processes, even if it has some specifics when it is about children. It is also about being open to what children are interested in – for example including TikTok as a tool. Capacity development strands. The philosophy of the program was to try a lot of processes knowing that some would fail. This is what allows innovation. This is a challenge in the NGO world to accept that failure can happen. Flexibility in programming is essential to stay connected to the process.

How do we support children can have an individual opinion that is not necessarily coming from the adults that are in their environment?

If we look at the agency of working children, and how the local dynamics connects with the international sphere. Development of self representation. How to go beyond story telling? There are plenty of methodologies: body mapping, theory of the oppressed, photo voices, maps etc. we need to open our mind around what is possible. Methodology as an invited space that was created by the researchers.

The premise of the whole ILO WFCL agenda is that children are powerless and need help from benevolent outsiders. How did the research help changing that narrative? Did it? There is value in sharing responsibilities in this project so that all partners (ILO, UNICEF, civil society) can learn from those experiences.

Were children compensated for their participation? This has been very debated in the project, and documented in a Process Note. The project is trying alternatives.

The project also has a social protection component that is very interesting. It is need based, both at individual/family level and community level, and with some cash transfer. The action part of the child participation has some pots of money to support it, again trying different models.

Room 2

Ethics

The first theme that was discussed was ethics and ethical standards for working with children. It was pointed out that standard safeguarding rules of pulling out children who are vulnerable do not work when the topic is the worst forms of child labour since all are very vulnerable to a variety of hazards. On the whole, ethical committees acknowledged this. This CLARISSA project incorporated a social worker into each country research team.

One issue was the danger of re-traumatisation through recounting life stories. This risk had to be weighed against empowerment through engagement with the process of action research. Judgements had constantly to be made through the project.

It was pointed out that ethical issues arose as the research process unfolded. Ethics does not comprise a set of fixed standards: ethics itself is a process.

Not all the partners in the project had the same perspectives on certain practices, such as payments to children for their time. In the project, different groups adopted different approaches.

Meeting project targets and deadlines

Targets and deadlines defined by donors or other authorities frequently pose problems for all participatory research. In this case, problems were exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and by cuts in funding, and other events that meant the initial programme had to be modified. By its nature, the participatory process is about managing uncertainty, since it is precisely about incorporating people who are not part of the initial conception of the programme.

Perhaps more important than project deadlines is the time enthusiasm for action research can be maintained in a community. Through experience, the project aims at completing all specific process in 9 months to a year.

Discourse on child labour

The question was raised of how the programme managed situations in which children's perspectives contradicted official policies, resulting in their being excluded from debate. This problem was reduced by the fact that everyone is concerned to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. Nevertheless, partners in the project include UNICEF and ILO, both of whom have policies independent of children's perspectives. The CLARISSA programme is driven by children and their

voices, and the project is concerned to show the sophistication of children's voices and the lack of nuance in certain other approaches. It was pointed out that in the informal institutions largely involving child labour, constraints of poverty extend to employers, who were often once child labourers themselves: a simplistic division into victims and perpetrators does not apply.

Sustaining energy created by participation

It was noticed that action research invariably generates local energy, which can easily be dampened by local bureaucracies. Enthusiasm can be maintained by ensuring that there is an element of action involved, producing results.

Relation of work to schooling

The relationship between work and schooling came up constantly in life stories, with many accounts of how children wanted schooling but were impeded by their work. It was pointed out, however, that available schooling is not a panacea for the children involved in the work.

CLARISSA

Finally it was pointed out that information on the CLARISSA project, together with reports arising from the research, are readily available at clarissa.global

Resource Links:

- Action Research Podcast on CLARISSA's systemic action research: <https://the-action-research-pod.captivate.fm/episode/systemic-action-research-with-dr-danny-burns-and-dr-marina-apgar>
- Apgar and Burns (2021) Reframing, refining and reconceptualising the worst forms of child labour through participatory adaptive programming. Journal of Modern Slavery. Volume 6, Issue 4: https://slavefreetoday.org/journal_of_modern_slavery/v6i4a1-Reframing-refining-and-reconceptualising-the-worst-forms-of-child-labour-through-participatory-adaptive-programming.pdf
- Emerging Evidence Report on How Action Research Generates Innovation: <https://clarissa.global/resource/how-does-participatory-action-research-generate-innovation-findings-from-a-rapid-realist-review/>
- Evaluation Research in CLARISSA: <https://clarissa.global/resource/evaluating-clarissa-innovation-driven-by-a-participatory-learning-agenda/>
- Multimedia story on Understanding the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Bangladesh's Leather Sector: <https://clarissa.global/resource/understanding-the-worst-forms-of-child-labour-in-bangladeshs-leather-sector/>