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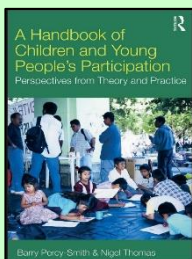
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Contact the author at www.harryshier.net.

Author's notes:

(1) This author's version includes an annex with ten additional photographs and captions that were submitted with the original text but did not appear in the published book.

(2) This chapter was abridged from a longer paper in Spanish published in the journal *Medio Ambiente y Urbanización* (Buenos Aires), available at: https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Shier-Retomando_los_caminos.pdf. The Spanish version tells Heyling and Deybi's stories more fully.

Pathways to Participation revisited: learning from Nicaragua's child coffee-workers

By Harry Shier, CESESMA, Matagalpa, Nicaragua

Introduction

Work on the promotion and development of children and young people's participation in the UK (and other northern countries) has tended to focus on one specific aspect, namely children and young people as service-users participating in consultations and, occasionally, decision-making around their use of public services. Much analysis has focused on labelling different modes and models through which such participation may be facilitated. The author's own "Pathways to Participation" model is an example (Shier 2001. See also Kirby et al 2003, Sinclair 2004).

By contrast, organisations working with children and young people in the global south, where there are few if any public services to access, have often taken different approaches, and come up with different models of practice, supporting and promoting more varied, more comprehensive and more developed forms of children and young people's participation. In this context, children and young people are widely recognised as "public actors", capable of influencing development (See for example Liebel 2007, O'Kane and Karkara 2007).

My experience of working with child coffee-plantation workers in Nicaragua for the past six years (2001-2007) has revealed how narrow was the concept of child participation I had brought from my previous work in the UK.

This article will describe how children and young people organise and participate in Nicaragua's coffee plantations and surrounding rural communities, and how the team of community education workers at local NGO CESESMA (Centre for Education in Health and Environment), of which I am a member, supports and facilitates them. Analysing this experience can help us identify some of the elements needed to construct a more complete and comprehensive model of children and youth participation, and as a result to implement and facilitate a wider range of participation processes.

Children's life and work in Nicaragua's coffee sector

Some of the world's finest coffee is grown in the remote mountains of northern Nicaragua, where extreme poverty and dependence on coffee production lead to a high incidence of child labour and the associated social problems. The Nicaraguan coffee industry employs many thousands of child workers who work long hours in difficult and dangerous conditions, receiving little or no payment for

their efforts. Almost all drop out of school early. Some have no opportunity to go to school at all. The globalised coffee market has little respect for the rights, much less the dreams, of these children. The consequence is a cycle of dependency, hunger and destitution in these remote mountain communities.

Nicaragua has, on the face of it, a legislative framework well-constructed to support children and young people's participation; starting with the Constitution which gives full legal force to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is further institutionalised in the Children and Young People's Legal Code (1998), and the Citizen Participation Law (2003). These laws provide for children and young people to have voice and representation in various local governance spaces including school councils, municipal children and youth committees and more. In Nicaragua, however, as in many other countries, what the law permits and what the people in reality have access to are very different. Children's right to participate may be guaranteed in law, but for this to be meaningful, it must be actively demanded and defended every step of the way.



Plate 1: Children picking coffee at Hacienda La Isla

CESESMA

CESESMA is an independent, non-government organisation working with children and young people in this region. All CESESMA's management and staff are Nicaraguans, with the sole exception of this author, and most are local people. Although we depend on overseas support and solidarity to fund our work, we are self-governing and independent of any external agency. CESESMA was founded in 1992 as an environmental education action group, and incorporated as a not-for-profit voluntary organisation in 1998.

CESESMA's mission statement is "To promote and defend the rights of children and young people, through processes of awareness-raising, reflection and action in partnership with rural children and young people, and other members of the community". CESESMA has also adopted a statement of shared vision which is of: "Children and young people with greater self-esteem; with opportunities for an integrated education; taking control of their own development; capable of organising themselves to defend their rights and contribute to finding solutions for the social, environmental and cultural problems affecting their communities". Important elements here are that children and young people are "taking control of their own development" and are considered "capable of organising themselves". If they aren't doing so already, this vision implies a firm belief that they have the potential to do so, given a facilitative and supportive environment.

CESESMA's strategy of training and development of Young Community Education Activists (Promotores and Promotoras)

At the centre of CESESMA's strategy is the training and support of young community education activists ("promotores" and "promotoras" in Spanish). Promotores/as, typically aged 12-18, are young people trained to run out-of-school learning groups with younger children in their communities. This gives them a leadership role and a platform for active organisation and engagement in community development activities and direct action in defense of children's rights, through which they influence political processes at different levels.

The process of training and development of a promotor/a typically has five stages which are described below. To bring them to life, we will follow the personal stories of two young people, Deybi and Heyling, both of whom picked coffee on the plantations from an early age, and were aged 16 when interviewed in November 2007.

Stage1: Children from age 6 upwards join out-of-school activity groups in their village community, which are run by already-trained and experienced promotores/as.

Groups currently active are:

- Organic farming and environmental action groups
- Folk-dance groups
- Mural-painting group
- Young radio reporters' team
- Youth theatre groups
- Crafts groups: sewing and dress-making, crochet, macramé
- Children's reading groups: These promote reading for pleasure and self-development, thus improving skills for use in and out of school
- Girls' groups (All the other groups are mixed; the girls' groups exist specifically to give girls and young women their own space to work on issues of identity, gender, sexual and reproductive health and women's rights).

School is generally morning only. Although most children work on coffee plantations, on family small-holdings, in domestic work or all three, they can generally organise their time so they can participate in activities that interest them. If parents are opposed (most often in the case of girls), the promotores/as will visit their home to persuade them to let the children attend. All activities are free and all participation voluntary. There is no advertising. Village communities are small and information spreads by word of mouth. Children know the local promotores/as in their village and what groups they are running. They go along to check these out and join groups that interest them (or where their friends go). Children who attend regularly gain new skills, build friendships and grow in confidence and self-esteem. There are often noticeable improvements in their school work.

It is important to stress that all the above-mentioned groups are organised and led by young people themselves, not by adults; the only exception being two newly-formed theatre groups.

CESESMA encourages the promotores and promotoras who run these groups to talk with children about their rights: Get them talking about how, where and by whom their rights are not respected, and discussing what they, as children and young people, can do about it.

Following the personal stories of Deybi and Heyling; in 2002, Deybi, then aged 11, joined CESESMA's children's radio project, where he became a local radio reporter, sending in regular stories from his home village of Granadillo #2. Heyling, also aged 11, joined a folk-dance group run by a friend of hers in her village of Samulalí.

Stage 2: Children join a promotores/as training course run by CESESMA, and thus themselves become promotores and promotoras

Children who are active members of these local activity groups learn quickly and, as their confidence and self-esteem increase, soon many of them decide that they too want to be promotores/as and share their skills with the other children of their community. At this stage they can sign up for one of CESESMA's three training programmes:

- *FOCAPEC: Training and Development Programme for Community Education Promotores/as*

This is a one-year course of ten monthly two-day workshops with practical tasks and projects in between. The curriculum combines key issues and key skills. The key issues are: children's rights, participation, identity and self-esteem, leadership (promotoría), gender equality, non violence, environmental conservation and health. The key skills are: group work, group organisation and leadership, communication skills, conflict resolution, community appraisal, community organisation, and influencing decision-making.

- *FOPAE: Training and Development Programme for Ecological Agriculture Promotores/as*

This is similar to FOCAPEC but with an emphasis on the environment, nutrition and sustainable agriculture and practical work on the collective vegetable plot. This is the option for young people who want to specialise in ecological agriculture and/or environmental activism in their communities.

- *Girls' and Young Women's Network training programme*

This programme has its emphasis on women's rights, gender equality, and a strong sexual and reproductive health component. This is the option for those girls and young women who want to work with other girls and young women in their community on these issues.

The target age-group for all three programmes is 12-16, but on occasion younger children are accepted if they have the enthusiasm, ability and maturity required.



Plate 2: Girls' and Young Women's Network training programme, Samulalí

The educational approach of the promotores/as' training programmes is based on a four-stage learning cycle model, derived from the classic Kolb model (Kolb 1984), adapted by CESESMA to emphasise collective action for social change:

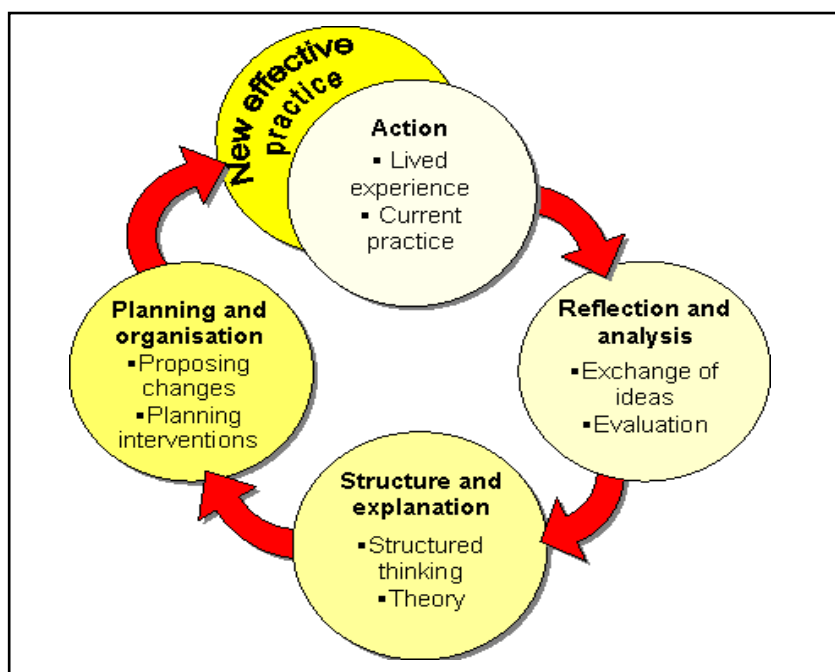


Figure 1: Four-stage learning cycle (after Kolb 1984)

Both Deybi and Heyling soon decided they were ready to share their knowledge with others, and so opted to join FOCAPEC courses in their home districts: Deybi in 2003, aged 12, and Heyling in 2004, aged 13.

Stage 3: New promotores/as, organised in a community promotores' network, multiply their skills and knowledge with other children and young people in their communities.

At this stage, typically aged 13+, some work alongside more experienced promotores/as, while others quickly form their own new groups. All become members of the district Promotores/as Network, where CESESMA provides support and back-up, ongoing training and development opportunities; workshops, short courses, exchanges etc. However, our aim is to reduce dependence on us as much as possible, in its place encouraging autonomy and mutual support amongst the network of promotores and promotoras in the area.

By 2006, Heyling was active in the local Girls' Network, helping organise a girls' group in her village. About the same time she also started a dress-making course. Deybi organised a local children's group in his village to share the skills and knowledge he had picked up on the FOCAPEC course. He also learned macramé from local promotores and started teaching this craft to children in his group.



Plate 3: Children's crochet group organised and taught by a young promotora.

Stage 4: Promotores/as become active in community action for development, and in advocacy and defense of children's rights.

Organised in the Promotores' Network, aware of the key issues, with developed skills and confidence, and able to count on CESESMA's support when they need it, the young promotores and promotoras get involved in a wide range of development and campaigning activities including:

- Participation in school councils, community children and youth committees, and as student representatives on school management committees.
- Participation as youth representatives in adult-dominated groups such as Municipal Children and Youth Committees, Municipal Development Committees, and Education Committees.
- Environmental campaigns: for example reporting illegal logging to the authorities, organising community clean-ups, environmental marches, anti-burning and reforestation campaigns.
- Awareness-raising on child-labour issues on the coffee plantations: The aim is not to try and abolish child labour, which is considered unrealistic, but to defend the rights of working children; for example reducing children's involvement in harmful work like spraying pesticides, reducing working hours, ensuring work does not interfere with access to education, and tackling abuse and exploitation.
- The theatre groups devise, produce and present original plays which expose issues of violence, abuse and exploitation to get communities talking about these issues and doing something about them.
- Through its young reporters' network, the children's radio team raises awareness of children's rights abuses, encouraging and publicising action in defense of children's rights.

Deybi, at age 15, was elected co-coordinator of the Promotores' Network in his community. "It's a big responsibility," he explained, "being in charge of all the work that has to be done: organising, promoting, mobilising, supporting, instructing". He also became active in national initiatives, including the National Children and Young Workers' Movement (NATRAS), and the National Network of Young Communicators. Heyling continued to play a lead role in the Girls and Young Women's Network in her district, helping organise women's rights workshops with local girls' groups.



Plate 4: Children and young people participating in a district Education Planning Forum in La Dalia. The forum was a key step in drawing up the Municipal Education Development Plan.

Stage 5: The most capable and committed promotores/as join CESESMA's area teams.

The three area teams, one in each of the districts where CESESMA works, are the main co-ordinating bodies, responsible for planning, organising, monitoring, follow-up and evaluation of CESESMA's work in the district. The teams are made up of young promotores/as, ages currently ranging from 11 to 20. The three team co-ordinators are themselves local young people, currently aged 20-23, employed by CESESMA as full-time Community Education Workers. The teams themselves seek new members from amongst the active promotores/as in their district. They try to maintain representation of all the village communities that make up the district, and also a balance between the different interests and activity groups. They used to pick the most experienced young people, but this excluded the younger promotores from the decision-making process, so now the emphasis is more on commitment and capability rather than years of experience, thus enabling promotores as young as eleven to be full and active members.

All the work of the young promotores/as is voluntary, including the responsibility taken on by the area teams, whose commitment is often virtually full-time. This presents complex issues for CESESMA.

We do not pay them a salary. This is partly because we don't have the resources, but more importantly because we have always insisted that they do not work for us. What they do, they do for the good of their community and for the defense of their rights as children and young people. If they received a salary, inevitably most would work for the salary rather than for something they personally believed in.

On the other hand, as they grow up, they need to survive and this means finding some way of earning a living. For most this means agricultural work on a coffee plantation or a family small-holding, or both, so by relying solely on voluntary commitment to fuel development, the communities are losing some of their most valuable human capacity.



Plate 5: Area team meeting, La Dalia.

CESESMA responds to this in two ways. Where young promotores/as want to pursue secondary or technical education, we can sometimes provide them with a small bursary to make this a reality. Another option is our programme of support for small production initiatives, or micro-businesses. Here we support young promotores (typically 16+) in forming partnerships and setting up their own small enterprises in the community. These currently include poultry farming, bee-keeping, dress-making, and growing chayas (a popular Nicaraguan vegetable with no English name). This enables many young promotores, who would otherwise emigrate or drop out, to remain in the community and divide their time between their own small business and their community work.

Heyling joined the Samulalí Area Team in 2007, aged 16. At about the same time, with CESESMA's help, she and two other young women started a small dress-making business. Deybi joined the La Dalia Area Team the same year, and became one of five partners in a poultry farm.

These five stages explain CESESMA's central strategy. It is a renewable and sustainable cycle, with children constantly joining, many going on to become promotores/as, and involving new groups of children in community activities. While this work with children and young people is the heart of our work, its success depends on the adoption of an integrated or "whole-community" approach. Therefore CESESMA works in parallel with adults: teachers, parents, community leaders and local officials, builds networks and alliances, and implements a media and communications strategy.

Reflection: Ten key learnings

How can this experience contribute to our understanding and conceptualisation of children and youth participation, and what can it offer to practitioners in the UK and other contexts?

1. It is a long-term process promoting personal development

As described above, it is clear that this is a process of personal development over years. We can see this process unfolding in the stories of Deybi and Heyling. It is not a hit-and-run "Let's get a group of young people together for a participation project" approach. Therefore we should not be surprised that over time participants develop impressive levels of competence, awareness, confidence, organising ability and communication skills; in short, empowerment.

2. Recognising children's capability and competence is a good starting point

We start from an unshakeable belief that children and young people are capable and competent. They have expert knowledge about their lives, their families, their communities, their hopes and fears. The tools they have available for analysis of this information may be limited to start with, but this is due to lack of educational opportunities, not lack of capability, and their local knowledge is no less valid and valuable.

Adults working with these children and young people must remain true to this principle in everything they do.

3. Children and young people's roles as educators in the community

A promotor or promotora is an educator, organiser and activist, and for many the emphasis is on the role of community educator. This is an aspect of participation rarely seen in northern contexts. Young people form and run activity groups, sharing their knowledge and skills with others, leading to what we call the "multiplier effect". In this, CESESMA's approach has much in common with "Child-to-child" or peer-learning models. These peer-learning groups are the platform that leads to community action for change, and the collective defense of children's rights.

4. Children and young people as community leaders

CESESMA's work is leading to a growing recognition that children and young people can have a leadership role; another aspect rarely seen in northern contexts. At the same time, it is challenging traditional leadership styles with new ideas about who is a leader and their role in the community.

5. Children and young people as advocates and defenders of their rights

Central to this approach is a strong children's rights focus, which implies moving from a needs-based to a rights-based approach (see Save the Children 2002). It also implies organised action by children and young people in the promotion and defense of their rights. Among the rights local children and young people identify as priorities are the right to quality education, the right to live without violence, the right to participate and have a say in their community, the right not be mistreated or exploited at work (the need to work, at least part of the time, being taken for granted), the right to a name and identity (i.e. to be registered at birth, as otherwise they become a "non-person"), and the right to a healthy environment.

An important strategy, also less common in northern contexts, is “denuncia”; that is the reporting of rights violations to the responsible authorities (and the media), with demands for preventative action.

6. *Self-organisation, pro-activism and autonomy*

CESESMA promotes models of self-organisation, joint organisation, and children and young people’s engagement in adult-dominated spaces; all have a role to play in promotion and defense of children and young people’s rights. In this context, the adult support role needs to be handled sensitively and skillfully to offer appropriate support with the aim of encouraging autonomy and reducing dependence on adult facilitators.

7. *Capacity to influence decisions in adult-dominated spaces*

Young people increasingly take on roles as elected representatives, delegated to represent their peer group in adult-dominated decision-making spaces, which inevitably involves challenging adult attitudes. When participation becomes fashionable, but adult attitudes don’t keep up, the tendency is for adults to permit young people’s participation in decision-making spaces without believing in its value. This is the road to tokenism. For this type of participation to be effective and non-tokenistic, the young people need to be empowered to set and pursue their own agenda for change.

8. *Direct action: Campaigning, protest actions and using the media*

When children and young people are supported in taking a lead in direct action, there is always a high risk of manipulation by adults. Marches and protests are fun, so it is easy to persuade children and young people to lend their numbers to a cause that is not theirs; hand out T-shirts and baseball caps, provide flags to wave (Hart’s (1992) “decoration” level).

On the other hand, if children and young people have their own organisation and leadership, including good spokespeople who can handle the media and make it clear that it is a cause they believe in and no-one is manipulating them, direct action can be hugely effective in working for change, specially if there is good liaison with the media (something adults can legitimately help with).

Young people’s community theatre is also a powerful communication medium in campaigns and protests. Youth theatre groups supported by CESESMA have performed their own original plays in support of local and national campaigns against child abuse, corporal punishment, and exploitation of child labour on the coffee plantations.

Children and young people themselves can also take control of the media in an organised and effective way; for example the young people’s radio project that CESESMA supports. Their weekly programme “Children and Young People’s Voices Heard” has been running continually for five years on local radio.

9. *Adult roles in facilitating and accompanying these processes*

In order to effectively and supportively facilitate learning, communication and organisation by children and young people, the facilitator needs to know:

- When do I tell the young people what to do?
- When do I help them decide what to do?
- When do I back off, so they can facilitate process themselves?

Adults working in these processes need training, specifically looking at their own attitudes, and learning practical techniques of process facilitation.

10. *Adult recognition and valuing of children and young people’s action.*

CESESMA’s impact evaluation (CESESMA 2003) shows that adults recognise the contribution children and young people are making to the community, and we believe this is the biggest factor in winning adult support for the promotion of children and young people’s rights. What is even more striking is

that adults are also recognising that learning is a two-way process; that sometimes they might even learn things from their children.

This contributes to changing adult attitudes to children and young people's rights: respect for children and young people's rights is no longer seen as a threat to the established order, but rather as bringing real benefit to the community as a whole.

"My children have developed. Now they can relate better to other people, adults as well as other children. They take responsibility for the workshops they run and they all participate. One runs a dance group and the others are involved in the organic farming workshops. They relate better to the community". (Parent, Samulali, quoted in the CESESMA Impact Evaluation study).

Conclusion

To sum up, I think this experience shows that "Participation" is bigger, broader, more varied and more complex than many previous analyses have suggested. One of the big challenges for adults aiming to facilitate non-tokenistic participation beyond a limited local level is to ensure children and young people are not manipulated into serving adult agendas. CESESMA's experience suggests that one way to achieve this is to support children's gradual "bottom-up" processes of learning, sharing, organising and mobilising, so that when children demand a voice in the big decisions that affect their lives, they arrive at the table as a force to be reckoned with.

To illustrate this final learning, I present the following visualisation of children and young people's participation, drawn up by a group of Nicaraguan participation workers in 2007:

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The Participation Tree

By the "Building a Children's Rights Culture" working group, CODENI, Nicaragua, August 2007

→ To understand the tree, start at the roots.

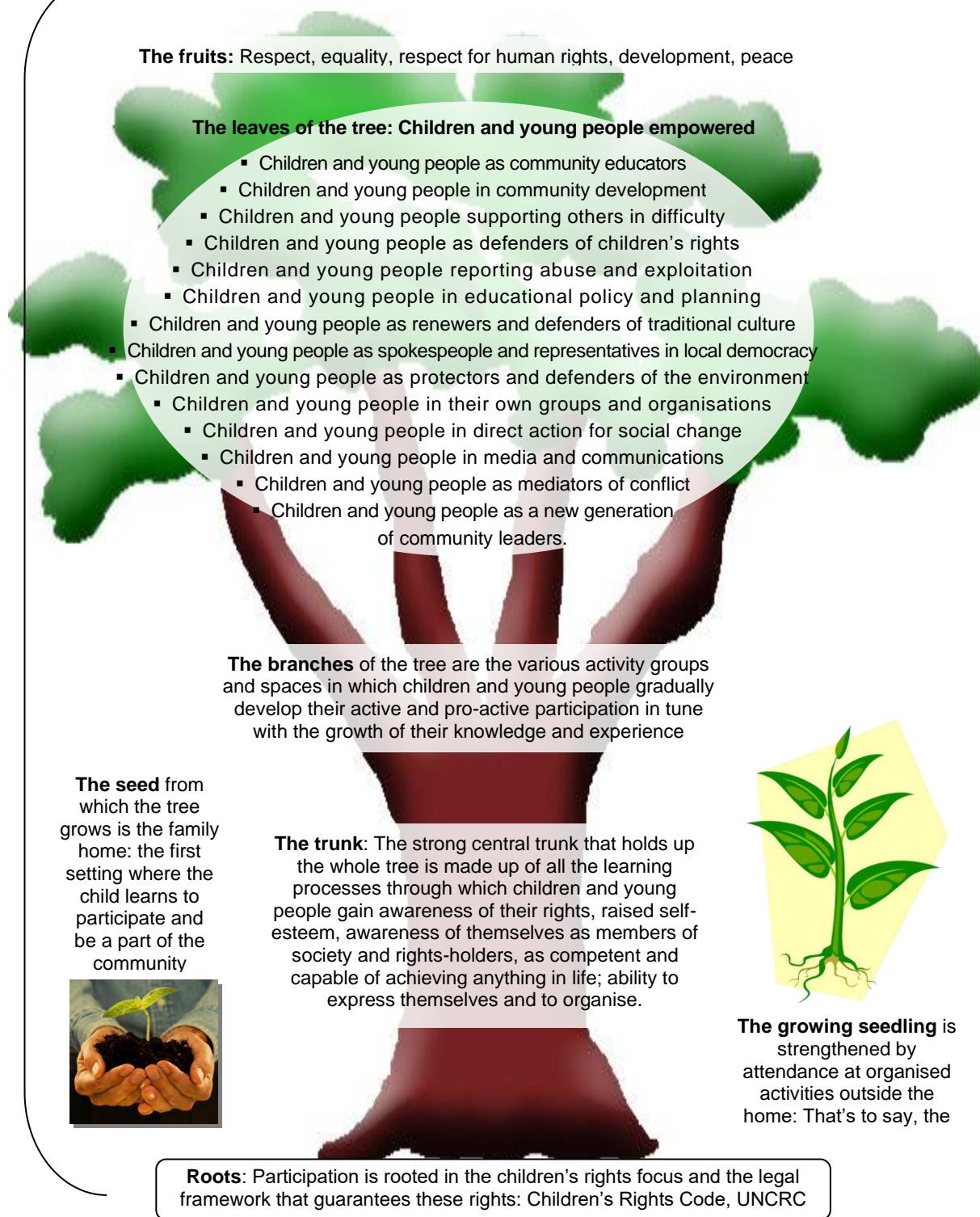


Figure 2: The Participation Tree

ANNEX TO THE AUTHOR'S VERSION: Photographs submitted with the original text that did not appear in the published book

(All photos credited to CESESMA, used with permission).



Photo A: Deybi José Valdivia Soza, aged 16



Photo B: Heyling Lisbeth González, aged 16



Photo C: Promotora Jeymi González (19) working with a children's dance group in El Diamante, La Dalia



Photo D: Young promotor Jared Ponce Sánchez (18) working with a group of children at the village school in Guadalupe Arriba, Samulalí. The children are working on a project called "Sharing how we live", which involves describing their daily lives to promote awareness-raising and solidarity with schoolchildren in Ireland



Photo E: FOPAE: Training programme for ecological agriculture promotores/as in Casas Blancas, La Dalia.



Photo F: Environmental march, La Dalia.



Photo G: The radio team in the studio at Stereo La Dalia. In front is children's radio co-ordinator Jauxel Ocampo (17). Although the team members have changed, with older ones leaving and younger ones joining, the weekly programme has been running continuously for five years.



Photo H: Monthly meeting of the Yasica Sur Area Team in the Community House at La Corona. Team members are aged from 11 to 21, facilitated by Co-ordinators Camilo Hernández (20) and Karla Sánchez (21).



Photo I: Bee-keepers Yeyrin Almendares (16) and Alejandro López (21) explain aspects of hive management to visiting young campaigners from Ireland



Photo J: Samulalí Youth Theatre Group, ages 12-19, performing their original play "Ya No Más Castigo" (No More Punishments) in the Justos Rufino Garay Theatre in the capital city, Managua, as part of the global campaign against corporal punishment promoted by the Save the Children Alliance. The group members devised the play themselves, based on personal experiences.