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# The Role of the Adult in Children's Empowerment

A Field Study of the Working Children's Movement in Nicaragua

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## Abstract

According to the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child, children themselves are entitled to participate in every decision concerning them. Implementing children's right to participation is a big challenge because it involves questioning the dominant discourse where childhood is defined a condition of powerlessness. The working children's movement is one of the groups of children who have been successful at portraying children as capable of acting upon their interest. In this field study of the working children's movement in Nicaragua children's empowerment in practice is examined. Empowerment as a process of gaining awareness is defined as change in the children's abilities to make choices, in this case through the help from adults. How changes come about at the structural, institutional and individual levels illustrate the dynamics of children's empowerment in practice. The necessary resources needed for genuine participation are turned into agency and achievements through the activities of the movement.

The role of the adult represents a power dimension in the empowerment process. To make power relations between children and adults visible in the process of promoting children's participation is pointed out as the key for successful empowerment.

*Keywords:* Children's Participation, Empowerment, Adult Roles, Working Children's Movement, Nicaragua

# List of Abbreviations

CON	Comisión Organizadora Nacional (former executive commission of the NATRAS Movement)
CNEPTI	Comisión Nacional de Eradicación de Trabajo Infantil (National commission for eradication of child labour)
CRC	United Nations Convention of the rights of the Child, see UNCRC
IPEC	International Programme of Eradication of Child Labour (within ILO)
ILO	International Labour Organization
NATRAS	Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores (working children and youth)
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
MINTRAB	Ministerio de trabajo (Nicaraguan Ministry of Labour)
OIT	Organización Internacional de Trabajo (International Labour Organization)
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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# 1 Introduction

With the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) from 1989 children worldwide were given the right to a *voice*. Article 12 with its emphasis on participation and empowerment rights is often mentioned as “the *most* significant and radical innovation of the Convention” (Stasiulis 2002:508). Here it is stated that “children are full-fledged persons who have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and requires that those views be heard and given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity” ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)). Article 12 is one of the four guiding principles that permeate the UNCRC and should be a part of the spirit in which the convention works. What is also referred to as the *democracy article* opens up for interesting discussions from a political point of view. Children’s participation might sound irrelevant in a world where many adults are denied the right to influence decisions in their society or where many children do not have either food or clothes. But scholars argue that children’s participation is vital, not only as a guarantee for them to grow up and develop but also to show a reality where children themselves can practice *agency* and present solutions to their problems. From my perspective there is no doubt that children’s participation contribute to democracy building (Espinar 2003).

The UNCRC is ratified by most countries in the world<sup>1</sup> and give evidence of a large agreement on the importance of children’s participatory rights – in theory. Implementing the right to participation is one of the biggest challenges that come with the UN document. A challenge for governments all over the globe but also for adults in general since it has to do with attitudes towards children, their *right to power* and their capacity to *exercise power* (Karkara 2002). Long established relations between children and adults must be questioned. Institutional frameworks must be transformed and individual behaviour confronted with in order to realizing the words of the Convention.

In contrast to failure of adult decision-makers to implement the participation rights of children, the contemporary children’s movement advocates a view of children as empowered and knowledgeable agents, who are nonetheless, like other marginalized groups in need of special, group-differentiated protections (Stasiulis, 2002). The working children in the south is a group of children who have reached relatively far in claiming their rights and practicing the right to participation. Children’s capabilities have been in focus of the discussion but the role of adults working to promote children’s rights have been left behind.

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<sup>1</sup> Only The United States of America and Somalia have not ratified the UNCRC.

## 1.1 Problem and Aim of Study

The aim of this study is to analyse how theoretical concepts are turned into practice by the process of promoting children's participation. The goal of the process of promoting participation is *child protagonism*<sup>2</sup> where the children themselves act in their own interests. This can be referred to as empowerment – a process of achieving awareness through the help of others. Power relations between adults and children in the empowerment process will be discussed by answering the following questions:

- How does the process of promoting children's participation work in practice?
- In what way will changes at structural, institutional and individual levels lead to children's empowerment?
- How are the power relations between children and adults affecting the empowerment process?

Field work on the National Movement of Working Children and Adolescents in Nicaragua (NATRAS) will visualize the dynamics of empowerment through the words of children and adults finding themselves at the heart of the process. By investigating the characteristics of working children's participation in their own movement the struggle for protagonism will be exemplified.

## 1.2 Plan of the Thesis

The field study of working children in Nicaragua is preceded by a methodological discussion, a theoretical framework, and the formulation of analytic instruments. By applying a critical approach I will discuss childhood as a socially constructed condition of powerlessness. How concepts are understood and the possibility to transform them into practice is important for critical research (Alvesson – Deetz 2000:7). The theoretical framework, beginning with chapter three, contains a conceptual discussion on the components of participation. Theories on childhood and infancy form our understanding of children's potential and agency and function as structural barriers in the process of empowering children. Daiva Stasiulis among other theorists offer a contrasting picture of children as active and capable. In the ladder of participation, drawn by Roger Hart, the degree of adult involvement in the process can be identified. Protagonism is defined as a higher level of participation and a stage of exercising agency. Child protagonism will then be discussed mainly through the ideas of Alejandro Cussiánovich and Manfred Liebel, both known for their work on working children's participation in Latin America. Community development researcher Gary Craig (2000:10) thinks

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<sup>2</sup> *Child protagonism* is my translation of the concept *protagonismo infantil*, frequently used in Spanish speaking literature. For definition of the concept see chapter 3.3

that children can be compared with other people living in underprivileged circumstances who are also excluded from full participation in their society due to structural and institutional barriers. Children's situations can be measured through instruments used by empowerment theorists Naila Kabeer even though her work is usually applied to poor women in the South. Chapter four concerns theories on power and empowerment as well as the connection between them. Empowerment will be analysed as a process defined according to Kabeer's theories, but also as a relationship adding the power dimension provided by Barbara Cruikshank. Empowerment is the name of the process when children's participation is to be realized in practice. In the two theoretical sections my analytic tools are created, making it possible to study the indicators of children's participation in NATRAS' empowerment process in chapter five.

The national NATRAS movement was formed in Nicaragua in the beginning of the 1990's by adults. The purpose of the movement is to promote the rights of working children but also for the working children themselves to be active in this process. In this field study children in the movement have identified necessary resources for changes to take place at structural, institutional and individual levels. Further it will be described how these resources might lead to agency and achievements. The power relationship between children and adults is present at all levels of the empowerment process and the roles between children and adults must be clear in order to reach high levels of participation and child protagonism.

### 1.3 Limitations

I will observe children's empowerment in a case study of the Nicaraguan working children's movement – NATRAS: I will draw parallels to empowering children in general but my conclusions will of course be related to the specific case. There is theoretical as well as practical resistance to children's participation (Hallet – Prout 2003:1). This resistance, however, will not be dealt with in my thesis. I will look at the processes and practices of adults promoting children's participation. My study should not be mixed up with a project evaluation.

Children's participation as in exercising agency and power is closely connected with the concept of citizenship. Several scholars quoted in this thesis talk about children's citizenship in their work. But citizenship will not be problemized in this thesis. A large number of concepts will be introduced and citizenship is a sidetrack that might complicate the discussion even more.

The theories of feminist Naila Kabeer have already been mentioned but the feminist approach to this text is very limited. It would certainly be interesting to study children's participation through a gender perspective but this study will focus on the relations between children and adults and will not go into for example the differences in conditions between boys and girls.



This study deals with working children's participation. However, it does not include a discussion for or against child labour. There is a cultural bias in the assumption that work can be harmful and bad for children. It is not my purpose to define child labour but to some extent I will touch upon the characteristics of a working child since he/she is the protagonist of my story.

## 2 Method and Material

The ability to make strategic life choices is important for the definition of power and empowerment presented by social economist Naila Kabeer (2001:26). Statistical data has difficulties in reflecting people's abilities to choose. I have used the possibilities given by qualitative research to review informal aspects of my research field. Changes in power relationships have been proven to take place in the informal decision making processes. This means that children can actually be empowered even though formal structures remain the same (Kabeer 2001:34f). To look at how social relations are created and how children's possibilities for action depend on these relationships is therefore crucial for fulfilling my purpose. There is unfortunately not much documentation regarding children's own initiatives, such as children taking active social and political roles in defending their interests or the rights of others (Stasiulis 2002:512). A case study of a reflecting children's rights movement can be useful for the investigation of participatory processes in practice.

Children's participation is not a huge theoretical field. As mentioned before most efforts in the area can be traced back to the introduction of the UNCRC in 1989. Feminist theories of women and empowerment can be useful as a complement to existing theories in the field of children's participation. Naila Kabeer (2001) has a lot to contribute to the discussion about including and empowering marginalized groups. However it could be a weakness that her analysis is aimed at measuring poor women's empowerment and not at children's participation. Theorists approaching empowerment from a critical perspective will serve as a complement to Kabeer by adding a power dimension to the empowerment process. The shortage of criticism regarding the concept of children's participation is due to the fact that most scholars on the subject are positive to the idea.

### 2.1 Outlines of the Field Study

In my field study I am trying to find out what people think about the concepts participation and power by investigating attitudes and opinions. It is difficult to avoid being biased about the results and conclusions drawn from the observed situations. It is not my ambition to present neutral facts about children's participation in practice. My own background and frame of reference work as a filter through which the presented reality passes.

I believe that children's own organisations can provide spaces where children can exercise power and participation in the spirit of the UNCRC. The working children's movement constitute an arena where child protagonism has

come quite far and where achievements are possible to measure. Other spaces and places where children can and should exercise agency might have something to learn from the advancement of working children. Nicaragua is one of many countries in the South with a large population of children, of which a great number are working. The Nicaraguan Working Children's Movement – NATRAS – is one of the organisations in the South that started on the initiatives of adults but as a voice for children, soon after the UN Convention. NATRAS has recently gone through a process of reflection, mainly focusing on the adult-children relations. This process is still reflecting on all the actions taken by the movement and the lessons learned from the internal discussions will give this thesis valuable insight. It is important to get close to the studied population in order to understand how they feel about the issue (Alvesson – Deetz 2000:231). Interviews have given me an understanding of the problem through information and personal opinions that were impossible to get in another way. I do not regard the interviews as collected material. An interview is a process and the answers a result of my meeting with the respondents (Kvale 1997:166). My interpretations of special statements made by the respondents will hopefully reflect the ongoing empowerment process of the children.

## 2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

I have used both informant and respondent interviews. My informants are key persons in the Nicaraguan civil society, and in one case it is a government official. They have all been chosen for their specific competence<sup>3</sup> (Esaiasson et al. 2002:289). They provided unique information on different aspects of children's participation in Nicaragua. The five adults chosen as respondents are all connected to the NATRAS Movement<sup>4</sup>. They are promoting children's participation from different functions; project educators accompanying the children in the meetings, project directors, board members of the association supporting NATRAS and executive director of the Movement.

Rossmann and Rallis (1998:126) consider the interview as a conversation with a purpose. I chose semi-structured interviews for the good possibilities to collect unexpected answers but also because of opportunities to ask follow up questions (Esaiasson et al 2002:279). To learn more about the participant's worldview without leaving the subject in focus I used an interview guide approach with open-ended questions (Rossmann – Rallis 1998:124f). One methodological problem using this method is that questions are popping up during the entire research process. It is a challenge to stay focused on your subject.

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<sup>3</sup> For questionnaire to informants see appendix 1

<sup>4</sup> For questionnaire to adult respondents see appendix 2

I am aware of the fact that some answers could have been arranged. However I have tried to reveal peoples perceptions and opinions and as such they cannot be said to be true or false (Esaiasson et al.2002:286). The results of the interviews will be used to discuss the concepts and the components in processes of participation and empowerment, in theory and practice.

## 2.3 Focus Group Interviews

An important part of this study is to compare theories on children's participation with participating children's views and opinions on the process. Children in my focus group interviews<sup>5</sup> were mostly older children and teenagers (ages 10-17) representing most of the children taking part in the activities of the NATRAS movement. This fact could limit the applicability of the results on younger children. Fifty percent of the 32 responding children were girls and fifty percent were boys. Two of the six focus group interviews were made with children from the capital Managua. Three groups were made up of children from other urban areas and one group was made up of children from rural areas. The urban – rural aspect could have had implications for the answers since the kind of work the children are involved in is very different, their needs and wishes are different as well as their methods of action. It should be noted that not all the children making their voices heard in this study have participated in the activities of the NATRAS movement. Nevertheless they are all organized and in one way or another they are taking part in the projects run by the movement's member organizations.

One of the biggest advantages with the choice of focus groups was that they gave me the possibility to get the opinions of many working children (Patton 1987:135). The interview was an arranged discussion around a subject with a few questions to remain on course. How questions were received by the participants is also taken into account in the analysis. The group situation made it possible for the children to listen to the ideas and opinions of the others and thereafter give their own view (Rossman – Rallis 1998:135). The method has a built-in quality control since the participants of the group tend to question a statement they do not agree with which then might be proven wrong (Patton 1987:135). Another advantage not to be ignored is that the children hopefully found it more fun and less serious when they were interviewed together with their friends (Patton 1987:135). Most of the children knew the other participants in the groups since I had to make the interviews in each project (members of NATRAS) separately due to logistic factors. On the other hand this could also be a weakness of the study or at least give other results than if the children were strangers to each other (Patton 1987:135).

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<sup>5</sup> For questionnaire and information about focus groups see appendix 3

In a study with power relations as a theoretical focus the power relations and hierarchies within the groups of children should not be underestimated (Patton 1987:135). In the majority of the groups one of the children was more expressive or well articulated than the others. They often formulated the thoughts of the group in the best way and are therefore frequently cited.

A sharp criticism on my method coming from the children themselves is illustrated through this translated section from one of the focus group interviews:

*How do you recognize symbolic or manipulated participation?*

In this interview you make the questions and we give the answers. We want to give our opinions without the necessity of being asked first. (Henry, 14, Ciudad Sandino)

## 2.4 Direct Observation

Through direct observation the researcher is part of a social process with the aim to build up an understanding from the inside through cultural conversations. (Norman 1996:165) As a complement to my interviews I have carried out a short ethnographic study of the Children's rights movement in Nicaragua that due to its limited character would be what Alvesson and Deetz (2000) would describe as a situation focus. The situation focus model embraces a small amount of ethnographic work to get local knowledge about the organisation. The purpose of the method is to gain knowledge from a situation, as opposed to traditional ethnographic ambitions to learn from a cultural system (Alvesson – Deetz 2000:225f). The working children as social actors are of course influenced by the context in which they are acting, in this case the national movement for working children and youth. On the other hand, the actors, through their actions, help make the organisation into what it is (Alvesson – Deetz 2000:223f). I was able to observe how children and adults within NATRAS and its member organisations categorise themselves and their surroundings. I could reach a better understanding by watching how people act in relation to each other within the institutional context where the empowerment process takes place (Norman 1996:165).

I chose to be present at three activities: the second national meeting held by the commission of NATRAS in charge of health issues during three days in Estelí, a smaller meeting planning and preparing for a national conference on sexual abuse and a hearing with mayor candidates arranged by children in Diriamba. This last visit was an outcome of the national meetings and an example of children acting locally to demand their rights. Among the disadvantages of using only three special events for the study are the limitations of time, room and representativity. It is also time-consuming and people's opinions on the research questions are not as readily taken advantage of as in the interview situation (Alvesson – Deetz 2000:226f).

## 2.5 Reliability and Validity

It is necessary to critically reflect on interview material. The social context and the special situation of being interviewed have implications for the stories told by my respondents and informants. The language could also be a factor of importance, especially since I am a foreigner in Nicaragua and that Spanish is not my mother tongue. There are complications due to the social context and the children as well as the adults in my interviews should be seen as political actors and not as representing the ultimate truth. These complications do not make the interviews less important (Alvesson – Deetz 2000:216f). Some of the working children forming NATRAS have been around for a while and know what to answer when someone asks them about power and participation. Others are new, and looks completely lost when asked the questions. These concerns will be referred to again in chapter five where the results of the field study are presented.

I was visible to my research objects in NATRAS to the extent that everyone involved knew who I was – a Swedish student doing research on working children's participation in Nicaragua (Rossman – Rallis 1998). In some cases, mostly to my informants, the purpose of my study was more profoundly explained as being about power relationships in the process of empowering children. My own background, appearance, use of language and the questions I chose to ask have most certainly played a part in the results (Alvesson – Deetz 2000:220). In Nicaraguan NGOs, foreigners in general and Swedes in particular are associated with aid and financial help. It must be mentioned that answers to some extent can reflect the fact that I was looked upon as someone evaluating the organisation and that future incomes could depend on my results. The interview itself is a power relationship, not just between the participants but also between the researcher and the children (Craig 2000:16f). No children were present in the process of choosing which quotations from the interviews to be used in this thesis. As commented before they could not choose the questions since their conversations were controlled by me (Hart 1997:40).

Finally I would like to mention that quotes in Spanish are translated into English by me, and there is a risk of details gone missing during the translation. One significant difference between the languages is the use of *power*. The substantive *poder* in Spanish means *power* and the verb *poder* is an expression of capacity similar to *can* or *to be able* to in English.

## 2.6 Analysing Field Work Results

The analysis of the results from the field work has been made by combining various techniques (Kvale 1997:184f). The answers by the children and adults connected to the NATRAS movement will help me tell the story of how participation is promoted in the movement, its strengths and its weaknesses. The

first step was to get a general overview of the material. I wanted to find out about attitudes towards the phenomena of participation, protagonism and power.

Some quantification in terms of counting statements was made to present the respondent's views. I see children and adults as two different groups of respondents since they are found in two different positions in the empowerment relationship. Contrasts were created by comparing the answers from the adults to the opinions expressed by the children. The analysis is aimed at "building up a logical chain of evidence and to create a conceptual/theoretical context" (Miles – Huberman quoted in Kvale 1997:185), this to increase the reader's understanding of participation in theory and practice. Through connections and structures found in the material my argument is presented – the importance of highlighting power relations between children and adults.

I am aware of the fact that my findings are dependent on my expectations. The researcher tends to observe to a large extent what he or she expects to see (Norman 1996:166). This is especially delicate in direct observation since my analysis is based on my notes which in turn are my own interpretations of what seemed important to write down at the moment of observing.

## 3 Children's Participation

As mentioned in the introduction children's participation is an emerging issue in social policy (Prout and Hallet, 2003:1). With article 12 the UNCRC presents an image of children as agents as opposed to the passivity usually ascribed to them. Despite its importance according to the UN, there is no country in the world acting satisfactorily in accordance with children's right to participation (Stasiulis 2002:516). One reason could be that the model of active citizenry for children spelled out in the UNCRC is not compatible with the "still dominant Western notions of childhood that fetishize innocence and attribute passivity and incompetence to children." (Stasiulis 2002)

When talking about the Convention and its potential it must be clear that we are dealing with a document made by adults for children. This basic fact does not change even if attempts are made to translate its contents into a more child friendly language (Liebel 2000:74). Not everyone believes in children's capacity to exercise power at all levels. Gary Craig asks the common question "How far can children speak for themselves?" (2000:15). Limits to the children's rights to participation are spelled out in the Convention. The possibilities to exercise participation are limited by maturity and capability of the child, restrictions often interpreted and defined by adults (Stasiulis 2002:516).

According to Stasiulis children's participatory rights are often subordinate their rights to protection. A degradation she blames adults for. Building on Franklin Stasiulis gives us an explanation from the tradition of liberalism. To own the right to protection one must only be a person with interests and the capability of suffering. Participatory rights can only be reached in combination with capacities of reason, rationality, and autonomy. These are capacities that children are not commonly associated with (Stasiulis 2002:530). It is not a coincidence that working children are those acting with greatest strength as protagonists promoting a new social role for children. For them it is necessary not only to be protected but also to be seen as a powerful actor (Liebel 2000:74).

### 3.1 Theorizing Childhood

Social representations of childhood and infancy continue to influence public opinion about the possible agency of children (Cussiánovich 2001:11). In these stereotypical and contradictory representations, children are caught between the roles of "little devils or little angels" (Prout 2003:14). Prout asks for an approach where children's experiences and childhood with all its complexities are in focus. The discourse on children's rights is still ambivalent and facing a big challenge. In a way it is built on modern paternalistic ground, that will be discussed further



in this section, and in another way it is built on non paternalistic, not yet explored, territory (Liebel 2000:73).

### 3.1.1 A condition of powerlessness

There are persons who do not listen to children smaller than me, [...] which do not take them into account only because of their age. Those adults do not have the knowledge that we have the same rights as an adult and that they have to fulfil them for us. We are not supposed to be discriminated only for being minors. (Alexis, 13, Jinotega)

When discussing children's participation, influence or power we must consider the origin of the childhood concept and its implications for children as social actors. Infancy is used to describe the period of life before becoming an adult. The Latin word *infans* means *does not talk, mute, does not have the gift of speech*. (INPRHU – Estelí 2001:24) The concept *participación infantil* (child participation) thus has a built-in contradiction in Spanish speaking countries. But not only Latin America is characterized by a paternalistic attitude towards young people. Child participation is a field where we cannot see any sharp dividing lines between the rich and the poor parts of the world. Children in Nicaragua have been looked upon as social objects without rights, passive and compliant. In Sweden as well as in Nicaragua children are considered the hope of the future and by this denied their rights to a social present (Hurtado Vega 2000:4).

Manfred Liebel (2000:71f) argues that the traditional paternalism has a colonial heritage and was brought to Latin America by the conquistadors. They considered children as little adults and subordinates of minor importance. The modern paternalism is a European middle class invention. Every age has its own characteristics and childhood and youth is a special stage in life. This childhood concept is dominant in Western Europe and North America while in the third world it is looked upon as a goal to be reached through development. A difference from the traditional paternalism is that children today are given a world of their own, restricted by their own laws. Childhood is strongly associated with innocence and weakness as opposed to strength, knowledge and agency. Special zones like schools and play are reserved for children where they can be excluded from the seriousness of life in areas such as work and politics (Stasiulis 2002:511f). This dominant view of childhood can be criticized for being both Eurocentric and class-bound (Stasiulis 2002, Craig 2000).

As discussed above there is no clear difference between different parts of the world when it comes to children's participation. This does not mean that there are no cultural differences in how the child is defined. Defining the boundaries of childhood has been one of the most significant problems with the UNCRC. It is clear that childhood does not necessarily have to be about age. It is rather about a condition of powerlessness (Stasiulis 2002:529). The adult world has through national as well as international laws given young people rights, power and responsibilities at different ages in some issues but not in others (Stasiulis 2002:528). Cultural views upon children cannot be understood without taking

into account political and economical structures, according to anthropologist Karin Norman (1996:26). This implies an understanding of how people live, their part in the production and distribution of goods and services, how family relations work, how power and material resources are distributed and what decision-making processes look like. With this understanding the importance of children in every specific society can be revealed.

### 3.1.2 Child Agency

The emerging theoretical field on children's participatory rights is trying to introduce the child as a subject with agency. Children are a social category in relation to adults. Both groups interact and are in different ways dependent on each other. This means that children are not only passive recipients of different education methods while they are waiting to become adults. They are also social actors influencing the adult life. Being a part of social life, they form their own perceptions about the world (Norman 1996:25).

To look upon children only being innocent and passive is a mistake. Stasiulis argues that many strategies and outcomes "might benefit from children's creativity, energy and idealism" (2002:528). As a fruitful strategy she proposes children's activism with the influence or guidance of adults. She sees small chances of success in children's efforts towards true participation without the support of adults. A group that has been excluded for so long from decision-making and policy making needs help to enter the arena (Stasiulis 2002:526).

It is important to point out that children should not be treated as 'little adults'. They are a special group; partly dependent on others for their life necessities and should be able to rely on the adult world in fulfilling their rights. But as Craig (2003:50) points out this dependence does not mean children cannot think critically and make informed choices.

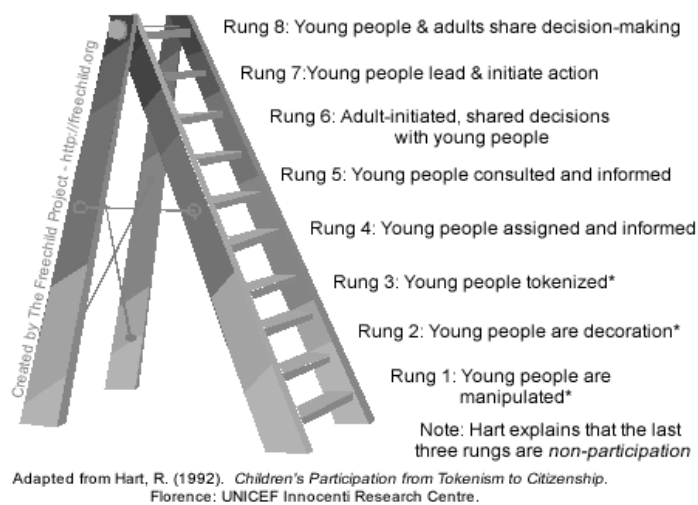
Stasiulis (2002:528) is in her study trying to find out what children's citizenship would look like if the children themselves were running the process instead of adults. She takes the Canadian children's rights movement as an example. The Canadian organisation Free the Children is a unique international youth organisation working for empowering young people through representation, leadership and action. Stasiulis' article emphasises children's right to meaningful participation distancing herself from the dominant view of children and childhood. She comes to the conclusion that "when children exercise agency, they are liable to be constructed as non-children and thus denied the rights of protection as child citizens as specified by the CRC" (2002:513). Theorists on children's participation agree that the children's rights movement does not see any contradiction between being a child and exercising agency. On the contrary, they have made it possible to combine the role of being object (in terms of protection) and subject (in terms of participation and protagonism) (Libel 2000:75, Stasiulis 2002). "Because children have been excluded from participation in institutionalized channels of political representation, they are also

more likely to engage in forms of direct democracy” (Stasiulis 2002:529). Examples of individual children’s participation are not missing. The problem can rather be described as the formal political structures and its connections with the informal political arena.

## 3.2 Ladder of Participation

Many scholars still recognize Hart’s “Ladder of young people’s participation” as an analytical instrument of great importance, used to measure approaches and methods in the participatory area (Craig 2000).

### Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



Step 1 – 3 are defined by Hart (1997) as non-participation and are unacceptable. It is called *manipulation* when children’s voices are used to carry the messages of the adults. One example of *decoration* is a child carrying a t-shirt with a message without being involved in organizing the campaign spelled out on their body. In *tokenistic* projects children “have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, or no time to formulate their own opinions” (Hart 1997:41). The following four rungs are degrees of participation. On which one of these a specific project lands depends on the children’s ability and interest. *Assigned but informed* is a commonly used form of social mobilization of children. It does not give great results in terms of democratization since it is a top-down process placed by adults upon children and should therefore not be used alone. Adult designed projects with large involvement of children are put down as *consulted and informed*. In all *adult initiated* projects which affect children (most projects do in one way or another) they should have a say according to the UNCRC. But to have a say is not enough. “To achieve real shared-decision projects, children need to be involved in some degree in the entire process” (Hart 1997:44). Cases

of the seventh rung, defined as *actions led and initiated by young people*, are difficult to identify. Most examples are found in children's play where adults can help without controlling. In the last stage young people initiate processes or projects but it does not mean that adults are not present at all. Collaboration between children and adults should be practiced in *shared decision making* according to the Ladder of Participation.

But there is also criticism formulated on Hart's model. There is a risk of paralysing action according to Roberts (2003:35) due to the fear of not reaching the highest level of participation. Instead of climbing the steps one at a time they fall in-between in their desire to fly to the top. This does not mean that the steps are to be taken chronologically, rather an individual judgement of in what rung to place every participatory project due to the interests and abilities of the children.

### 3.3 Child Protagonism

In Latin American literature about child participation the concept *child protagonism* is frequently used. There are many different answers to what the concept stands for and the implications of using it. This section will discuss briefly the contents of what could be referred to as protagonic participation. According to Liebel too many institutions and projects for the benefit of children understand child protagonism as methodology or educating technique. Instead he wants to describe child protagonism as a new infancy being born.

Talking about child protagonism, we manifest a vision that contradicts the idea of a domesticated, obedient and excluded infancy, in favour of a new concept that regards children as social subjects with capacity to participate (Manfred Liebel 2000:211).

In the dominant model of infancy of today described in 3.1.1 there is no room for child participation. Participation is to Liebel an essential element of protagonism. If we talk about participation for participation itself it is useless. Cussiánovich describes protagonism as the aim of the right to participation. "There is no protagonism without participation, but not all participation is protagonic" (Cussiánovich 2003:28). Protagonism is part of a path of forming an identity with social action as a subject and not an object. It has to do with identity, actions and outcomes. The roots of the concept can be traced back to 1968 and the liberation theology. The working children's movement in Peru adopted the concept in 1976 and applied it to the context of working children. (Cussiánovich 2003:28)

As already mentioned participation is a wide concept. If we want to reach further than just counting the number of children in an activity we must name the kind of participation we want to achieve. To be a protagonist means to have the leading role in a play or a novel. Protagonic are those children who have the lead role in their own participation. "Protagonism is the theory of the participatory practice" (Cussiánovich 2003:28).

### 3.4 Adulthood

One of the basic elements in child protagonism is the role of the adult. In general the adult-child relationship reproduces the hierarchies of an authoritarian society. This phenomenon is widely spread in both public and private spheres such as the family, the school and the community (Cussiánovich 2001:11). Adults suffer a crisis when their authority is questioned in traditional institutions for education and social control of children, the family and the school. Today relatively few adults are truly convinced by the idea of child protagonism, according to Liebel. Sometimes they are even frightened by children starting to mobilize and organize themselves (Liebel 2000:217, Craig 2003).

The working children's movement talks about *adulthood*<sup>6</sup> as the ideology of adults exercising their power over children and young people. They all agree that adulthood should be fought. The usual strategy is to empower the children, since "effective work with children may challenge the power of adults." (Craig 2000:20) But in this process it is also necessary to initiate a more systematic evaluation of the dominant adulthood culture, of what it means to be an adult and of what roles and attitudes are reproduced (Cussiánovich 2001:45).

This discussion must be balanced so that adults are not looked upon only as threats to children's empowerment. The adults working together with the children in the movements usually play an important role for the continuity of the organization, adults stay while children stop being children. A balance need to be kept between children's autonomy and the continuity of adults (Liebel 2000:222).

### 3.5 Critical Voices on Children's Participation

For some children and young people, consultation, particularly consultation which appears to be cosmetic, may well be seen as disbenefit, drawing on one of the few resources over which children and young people exercise some direct control – namely, their time. (Roberts 2003:32)

One can ask if there are not any risks with or negative sides to participation. According to the children themselves, participation will not work without interest and motivation from the target group. This will be discussed further in chapter five. According to Roberts (2003:34) the right way to go about must be letting the children decide on when, whether and how to participate.

Participation might be an important goal for children's rights theorists or enthusiastic adult promoters. But to some of the poor children in Nicaragua it might seem more important to meet basic needs with or without participation (Craig 2000:8). However it can be argued that participation is a path to other rights and towards meeting basic needs. An awareness of your rights should also include an awareness of your responsibilities. Engwall and Söderlind (2001) define childhood as a time when the human being is developing physically, cog-

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<sup>6</sup> My translation of the Spanish word *adulthood*.

nitively and mentally. It is therefore important not to ask too much of the child. The demands should be adjusted to the development level of the child. Consequently the focus of children's participation should be on children's rights, not children's obligations. Children's participation is not equal to any citizen participation project. We should not look upon the participating children as little adults. Bertha Rosa Guerra, at the international programme for eradication of child labour (IPEC) in Nicaragua, stresses the importance of limits to children's participation. In the empowerment process children need to learn that their opinion is not the only one that counts. For the adults empowering the children "it is just as bad not putting up any barriers as putting up too many" (Bertha Rosa Guerra).

# 4 The Construct of Empowerment

Empowerment is a frequently used concept with a relatively short history, not more than 30 to 40 years. It is most often described as a process of gaining conscience which in turn can open up for political actions in order to demand rights. As a result empowerment will lead to changed power relations. One of the fields that use empowerment most frequently is feminist research. The concept is not as common in studies discussing children's participation. Gary Craig defines children's empowerment in his work on children in community development:

Empowerment implies the creation of sustainable structures, processes and mechanisms, over which local communities (in this case, of children) have an increased degree of control, and which themselves have a measurable impact on public and social policy affecting those communities, a definition incorporating both outcome and process goals. (Craig 2003:49)

Most structures are today dominated by adults and children's empowerment must be seen as a long lasting process according to Craig (2003:49). Social economist Naila Kabeer presents a similar empowerment concept, exemplified by women's empowerment. She provides useful analytic instrument for indicators of success. The ongoing empowerment process within the NATRAS movement in Nicaragua will be discussed in the light of her framework. When studying poor women's empowerment in the South, the rich and independent woman in our part of the world is often present as a role model, intentionally or not. Discussing children's empowerment in terms of protagonic participation is a different case. The working children in Nicaragua – have in many ways reached higher on the ladder of participation than someone the same age in Sweden.

## 4.1 The Empowerment Process

Naila Kabeer (2001) explains the empowerment process in an organised way. She defines empowerment as a process of change – from lacking power to having and exercising power. Power to Kabeer is the ability and possibility to make choices. To make choices is possible where we have real alternatives; there must have been a possibility to have chosen otherwise. "Empowerment thus refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." (Kabeer 2001:19) There are many reasons for people to make different strategic life choices. When studying empowerment the interesting part is the inequalities in people's ability to make choices. Differences in choices, which may be the consequences of different preferences, should not be considered here. (Kabeer 2001:19)

#### 4.1.1 Resources, Agency and Achievements

When discussing empowerment as a process of gaining power we recognize the existence of disempowerment as a condition of powerlessness. A person, in this case a child, who lacks the ability to make life strategic choices, is disempowered. Kabeer forms her empowerment concept with three dimensions:

- *Resources*: the conditions under which choices are made
- *Agency*: the process of formulating goals in life and act upon them
- *Achievements*: the outcomes of the choices

Resources may be of material character such as land, money, equipment or labour but it may also be social resources which can be expectations and obligations in relationships with other people. Human capital is also a resource with knowledge, fantasy, creativity and all that comes along with it. Kabeer wants us to understand resources in terms of control over rather than access to. (Kabeer 2001: 31) The second dimension, agency, can reflect the different ways of conceptualising power. As “power to” agency is the ability to define your goals and act upon them. The meaning, motivation and purpose expressed through the activities of an individual are forms of agency. Agency can also be power over when describing a person’s ability to over-ride the agencies of others. Power to and power over, is by Kabeer referred to as negative and positive power – a somewhat clearer definition. Achievements can be seen as the sum of resources added to agency. Realisation of achievements is the goal of empowerment (Kabeer 2001:21). All three dimensions of empowerment are interrelated and cannot be measured by them selves. According to Kabeer’s “*the three dimensions are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as measure of empowerment.*” (2001:40) Child protagonism has to do with initiatives and actions to which a high level of participation is the outcome. The three dimensions therefore must be studied together to make this analysis of children’s protagonism complete.

#### 4.1.2 Levels of Empowerment

The definition of empowerment argued for by Kabeer does also include an explanation of the levels on which empowerment works. Empowerment reflects changes at three analytical levels:

- *Structural* relations of class/caste/gender
- *Institutional* rules and resources.
- *Individual* resources, agency and achievements

These three levels are inter-dependent just like the dimensions of empowerment. For a meaningful and sustainable process of empowerment to take place changes



at all levels are necessary. The social context can therefore be a “structure of constraint”, preventing individual children from exercising agency and making choices. Favourable changes in structures such as the institutional framework inside which children act is crucial for an empowerment process to succeed (Kabeer 2001:47f). On the whole Kabeer (2001:48) does not believe in individual empowerment alone. In order to consolidate achievements and changed power relations collective empowerment must be mobilized from the gains of each individual.

## 4.2 The Empowerment Relationship

Critics of empowerment describe the process as a strategy of acting upon others by making them act in their own interest. Empowerment itself becomes a power relationship. Barbara Cruikshank (1999) and Bob Pease (X) are two critics of empowerment from a postmodern or poststructuralist perspective. They argue that empowerment actually has disempowering effects since it rests on a modernist concept of power. In the modernistic discourse power is treated as a commodity and it is in many ways based on the dichotomy to have power or not to have power (powerful/powerless) (Pease X:1). Postmodernism on the other hand focuses on structures, implicit uses of power and discourses.

### 4.2.1 Power Over – Power To

The modern discourse on power has almost exclusively been concentrating on studying power and the dynamics behind it as *power over* closely connected with the concept of dominance. If there is such a thing as power over, consequently inferiority must exist. These various definitions of power as domination are, according to Stewart (2001:12) all variants of Lukes’ (1974:34) sentence “A exercises power over B when A affect B in a manner contrary to B’s interests”.

Two well known critics of the dominating view of power are Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. They regard power as rooted in collective action.

Power “corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power), disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes.” (Arendt quoted in Lukes 1974:28)

Power is according to Arendt (1958), always potential power and not something static, measurable or stable like force or strength. This conceptualisation of *power to* gives us a tool to act with which the *power over* fails to provide. Communicative action through dialogue is pointed out as a way of reaching to a good society. A problem with *power to* is the inability of excluding the dynamics of *power over*.

#### 4.2.2 Powerful – Powerless

However, not only the concept of power, but also empowerment, has a modernistic tradition that needs to be taken into account. If dichotomies in the language are not questioned, empowerment practitioners tend to widen the gap between the powerful and the powerless. A top-down approach and force from the elite upon oppressed groups are common elements in empowerment campaigns. “Professionals are supposed to be experts, but the power in their expertise can dis-empower clients and thus subvert the goals of the profession” (Pease X:5). Adult social workers promoting children’s participation could be seen as experts and working children as the powerless to be empowered. The empowerment expert creates an illusion of equality while he or she is actually reproducing a relationship of domination. This argument may be compared with Steven Lukes third dimensional view of power where he describes a potential conflict between the interests of someone exercising power and the real interests of the one being excluded.

Working children in Nicaragua are a part of the powerful – powerless dichotomy in several ways. They are poor as opposite to rich, they are inhabitants of the South as opposite to the North, they are defined as developing rather than developed and last but not least they are children and not adults.

Barbara Cruikshank (1999:73) has a different point of view compared to Kabeer when she talks about empowerment more as a relationship than a process. A relationship, which she describes, has four main characteristics:

- Empowerment is a relationship initiated by *expertise* (in this case adults)
- Exercise of *power* when one party is empowering the other.
- Dependent on knowledge from the subjects to be empowered.
- The relationship contains voluntarism and coercion at the same time.

What these four steps mean in practice is that the power dimension of the empowerment process needs to be critically reviewed.

### 4.3 Indicators of Empowerment

The field study of children’s participation in practice will focus mainly on *how* the aims of the NATRAS movement are achieved and not so much on *what* is done (Craig 2000:20). Indicators of change within each level of the empowerment process will be discussed. However it is important to point out that “indicators of empowerment need merely ‘indicate’ the direction of change rather than provide an accurate measurement of it.” (Kabeer 2001:52) The human agency involved in the process of changing power relations (empowerment) cannot be predicted. (Kabeer 2001:52)

# 5 Children's Empowerment in Practice

This section will discuss the results of the field study on the working children's movement in Nicaragua and give concrete examples of children's participation in practice. The different levels of the empowerment process aiming to reach child protagonism will be discussed.

It is one thing to have everything clear theoretically but in the moment of practice it is like we forget everything and we go back to traditional routines. What we want as adults and think as adults is what we sometimes impose on the children. (Ileana G3nzales)

There is a large discrepancy between the theoretical discourse on participation and the context of political and social structures in practice (Cussi3novich 2001:11). This is the story about the Nicaraguan working children's movement – NATRAS, who are just getting back on their feet after having had some difficulties. Through interviews and visits I have reached an understanding of children's empowerment with the help from the lessons learnt by the constant process of reflection that NATRAS now find themselves in.

The indicators of participation identified during the field study will be analyzed in the framework of Kabeer's levels of empowerment – structural, institutional and individual. The understanding of the concept of participation by children and adults is important for valuing the indicators and future achievements. It will be argued that power relations are present at all levels of the empowerment process and the understanding of those might be the key for achieving a high level of children's participation. I have tried to follow an advise from Craig (2000:26) when looking at the indicators of empowerment – “to make the important measurable, rather than to make the measurable important.”

## 5.1 Structural Level

The deeper levels to be changed in the empowerment process are described by Kabeer as structural relations of class, caste and gender. In children's empowerment it is clear that we are talking about structural relations due to differences in age. The working children's movement globally is trying to change the view of children and infancy discussed above. The Nicaraguan context in which NATRAS are acting is one arena where structural changes are necessary for children's empowerment to succeed.

### 5.1.1 The Global Working Children's Movement

A rich variety of participatory processes with children at local, district, national and regional levels are being promoted and supported by nongovernmental

organizations. These organisations and movements worldwide enable children to unite collectively for the realisation of their rights with the purpose of challenging the view on childhood as a condition of powerlessness. Children want to represent themselves and to be recognized as the experts on their own situation (Stasiulis 2002:529). Stasiulis concludes in her study of a Canadian children's movement that

In contrast to the relative failure of adult decision-makers to implement the participation rights of children, the contemporary children's movement advances a view of children as empowered, knowledgeable, compassionate and global citizens, who are nonetheless, like other marginalized groups, in need of special, group-differentiated protections. (Stasiulis 2002:510)

According to Stasiulis children have shown that there is no need to choose between protection and agency. It is the responsibility of the government to protect children against exploitation and abuse but at the same time children should be actively involved in policy making concerning them. Participation and protection work in symbiosis. (Stasiulis 2002:530) It is important to study the children's own movements to reveal a pattern of what turns these participatory processes will take.

Ileana Gónzales, president of the adult association in support of NATRAS, thinks that the working children and youth, because of their experiences as workers, are those who can bring changes about the status of children in the world.

These children have their autonomy, levels of participation and organization. These children perhaps have visions at an earlier age than children who have everything, that do not have to fight for the right to education, health and play. Working children are more expressive, less timid, they claim their rights. (Ileana Gónzales)

### 5.1.2 The Nicaraguan Context

Nicaragua is a country with very short democratic experience. Mario Chamorro, director at Dos Generaciones, argues that the long period of dictatorship and internal conflicts in Nicaragua are in fresh memory. Adults want to empower children according to their participatory experiences. And since many adults have been denied the right to participation themselves, they carry their own imperfections into the process of children's empowerment. The roots of citizen participatory processes can be found in the Sandinista revolutionary government in the 1980's. Pedagogical and methodological ways to promote participation were learned in that time and visions for the future were formulated (Ileana Gónzales).

We have visions about the children and the youth as social subjects with rights, as persons with capacities, with thoughts and feelings capable of transforming their situation and to be able to give a hand in the development of society. This is what the national NATRAS movement strives for – that the rights of working children and the youth as a sector should be fulfilled. (Ileana Gónzales)

NATRAS was formed after the fall of the Sandinista government in 1990 when the number of street children started to increase dramatically. Many organizations and projects that used to be a part of the government now found themselves in opposition and part of the civil society. Almost at the same time the Convention on the Rights of the Child came and provided the organizations with a lever for fulfilling children's rights. UNCRC defines a child as a human being under the age of 18. In Nicaragua around 60 % of the population has not turned 18 and are therefore children and entitled to children's rights. According to recent figures by the labour ministry, MINTRAB, around 314 000 are working children. This figure does not include many of the domestic workers and children in the countryside helping out in farming (Fonseca 2004:1). Lidia Midence at MINTRAB is working for the national commission for eradication of child labour, CNEPTI, and she has a very positive view of what is done for children in Nicaragua at the moment. According to Lidia, Nicaragua has come a long way in taking child labour seriously. The children's code is a national legal document protecting children's rights. Among the achievements during the last years she mentions that "child labour is now an issue in the national development plan".

The question about child labour is a difficult one. NATRAS agree with the International labour organization, ILO, on the eradication of the worst forms of child labour. But NATRAS along with other NGOs is trying to convince them that work itself is not bad, what should be changed are the conditions under which children are working. To eradicate all child labour is not a realistic attitude in a country with a government without will to change, with a galloping corruption that looks difficult to stop (Ileana Gónzales).

This dream of an island of happiness for children is far away and will make the families feel even more guilty, will blame the working children more, and in the worst cases lead to more abuse of children. If work is forbidden, working children become invisible. (Ileana Gónzales)

NATRAS is against the idea that children were born to play and not to work. What they want is to put the issue of child work on the agenda, but with the opinions of the working children in focus (Jamileth Ocampos, executive director of NATRAS). "We see work as a right. Children have the right to life; working gives you food and life and should be considered a right" (Ileana Gónzales).

For adults working with NATRAS the children's code and other advances in the institutional framework are not enough. It is a difficult work to promote child participation and protagonism since it means fighting conceptions and practices that adults have. Ileana compares the subordination exercised by adults towards the children with the power men exercise towards women. In this case adolescent girls are suffering double discrimination, for being a child and being a woman.

## 5.2 Institutional Level

Institutional rules and resources are the next level in the empowerment process to be discussed. Children in this study are connected to an NGO or a movement, and their empowerment is affected by the rules and practices of that organization. One big institutional change in favour of children's participation is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child discussed in chapter 3. How children and adults understand the participation concept and the relation between participation and protagonism is important for their abilities to endorse institutional changes.

### 5.2.1 The National NATRAS Movement

The national NATRAS movement was formed in Nicaragua in the beginning of the 1990's by adults. The purpose of the movement was to promote the rights of working children but also for the children themselves to be active in this process. It was and is still a cooperation between the projects of different NGOs around the country working for children's rights. NATRAS can be described as a social movement functioning as a network for children organised in different NGO's.

In the beginning NATRAS was constituted of an assembly where all decisions for the movement were made. Since only children could be NATRAS<sup>7</sup> they are no juridical person and the adults therefore had to form an association in support of the National NATRAS Movement. The children of the assembly were elected in their projects and they in turn elected an executive commission called CON (comisión organizadora nacional). "We had advanced elections at adult levels and CON executed the work plan proposed by the assembly" (Jamileth Ocampos) But members of the CON turned into an elite who stopped going to their projects in their municipalities. The NATRAS Movement was centralized in the capital. These internal debates started around 1996.

One of NATRAS' achievements during this time was addressing to and negotiating with the National Assembly (the Parliament) about children's participation. They also strengthened their identities as children and workers. Working children, a group that used to be invisible, was now recognized. But the process had to be interrupted due to internal problems. Cases of manipulation of the children by the adults were detected. Children were seen as pawns in a game of chess. The movement entered a process of consulting and evaluations. Out of these discussions a vision for the NATRAS movement was formed:

We are a broad movement of working children and adolescents, interacting in society, recognized and appreciated as protagonists, organized in different places and spaces, influencing local and national politics, divulging the promotion and implementation of children's rights. (Profile of NATRAS)

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<sup>7</sup> NATRAS stands for working children and adolescents. See List of abbreviations.

Today NATRAS has formed working commissions with children from the different member projects. The commissions work in the areas: communication, physical protection, education, organisation and participation. The last three or four years the Movement has gone through a process of decentralization. Launching campaigns on subjects like education or health in the municipalities is part of this process. Since 2002 they are working on a campaign against sexual abuse of children. The campaign has three components: seminars, political lobbying and social communication. Seminars last for three days and are taking place every second month. What the children and adults learn in the national meetings they are supposed to pass on to other children and adults back in their municipalities, children to other children and adults to other adults. Alexis, 13 years old from Jinotega describes these multiplication activities.

We gather to lecture on the topics they teach us here in the meetings of Natras, and we try to pass it on to the children from the market; those who sell water, those who stand by the traffic lights selling all kinds of things to survive. To these children we talk about the themes – in what risk they are, how to defend themselves. We also try to pass it on to the other children from the organisations, who did not have the possibility to come, like we have, we who were selected. We share with them; it is almost the same as if they were here. (Alexis, 13, Jinotega)

Around 20 NGOs are active members of NATRAS and are represented in the campaign. The campaign is launched in 12 municipalities and the idea, slogan and material has been developed by the children themselves. The campaign should now be intensified at a national level and at the time of this study preparations were made for a large national forum in the autumn of 2004.

The children seem to be somewhat grateful for the opportunities the movement has given them. Knowing about their rights they can avoid discrimination in school, in the family, in their community.

Before we did not know anything, anything about rights and about being discriminated. But now, when we come to lectures and pass it on to other children and also to adults they take us seriously in the family, in school and in the community as well. (Ingrid, 12, Somoto)

NATRAS used to have quite a lot of cooperation with other actors in the Latin American working children's movement. But since they had internal problems they had to take a break (Jamileth Ocampos). In addition to the national working commissions in some municipalities the NATRAS are organizing themselves in interest groups. "I think if it is to be a genuine participation, organization and protagonism it has to come from the interests of the children themselves", says Jamileth Ocampos. Forms of organization, like boards and presidents should not be forced upon the children. Jamileth says they are now letting the different municipalities organize themselves in their own way.

NATRAS was created in the spirit of promoting child protagonism. But since participation in a movement like NATRAS is an empowerment process initiated by adults with the purpose of strengthening children's own agency. This is an example of Barbara Cruikshank's theories about power relationships. Hierarchies

have a large role in every society, even in the NGO-world which talks a lot about equality and role modelling.

NATRAS has not yet fulfilled the dream of a complete social movement, according to Jamileth Ocampos. “At this moment we are a coordinating body for the projects.” The next step for NATRAS is to convert into a social movement organized and directed by the boys and girls themselves. What stops them from reaching this stage today is a lack of understanding of the role of the educators, a need for more spaces and places for child participation, and a necessity to open up to other sectors. The NATRAS Movement is also dependent on the processes taking place with the children in the projects. And if the projects are not interested in promoting genuine participation they hold back progress. (Jamileth Ocampos)

### 5.2.2 Understanding Participation and Protagonism

The contents of the UNCRC and article 12 is well known in theory among children as well as adults in the Nicaraguan Civil Society. But there are variations to the meaning different actors give to the words and how they put them into practice. Jamileth Ocampos, tells me that the participation promoted by NATRAS is protagonic. Her definition represents what the concept of participation means to the movement: “An active process of being human and to take part in activities, but also a process of awareness, a protagonic, and responsible process.”

In the movement’s member projects cultural and sport activities often fill the participatory quota. This is illustrated by a quotation from one girl with no experience in the activities of NATRAS. To her the word means; “participating in a group, it could be dancing...” (Scharleth, 12, Ciudad Sandino). None of the adults asked are satisfied with a conceptualization of participation meaning only presence or assistance. They all agree that there is a deeper meaning to the concept and give examples like making proposals to the municipal governments.

Among the children with long time of involvement in the movement or in the projects, participation is understood as “a space where we can state our opinions freely. We can express what we think, what we feel, without somebody telling us to” (Karen, 17, Managua). It can also be

to gather with different sorts of people, form different municipalities to talk about an issue that benefits us, that can help other people. (Danilo, 14, Jinotega)

Other short answers given were: voicing opinions, talking, raising your hand, contributing to something and observing. These answers respond well to the top half of the ladder of participation. Both children and adults pointed out the fact that participation is a right that has to do with spaces and places where you can express yourself.



We have understood that participation means voicing opinions but that is not the end of the empowerment process. An isolated indicator cannot measure the value of outcomes. The profile of NATRAS says:

Children and adolescents are protagonists of their own movements, empowered, with developed capacities, with own identities, aware of their obligations [...] with perspectives of transcending into other spaces and places. (Profile NATRAS)

Protagonism, could be formulated as a higher level of participation where one also is part of the decision making processes (Mario Chamorro). Protagonism according to the children and adults in this study means to promote, to act, to decide and *to exercise agency*. “I voice my opinion, but that is only words, I have to make a concrete action. I talk but I also do things” (Henry, 14 Ciudad Sandino). Participation is a right. Protagonism is to exercise agency. The empowerment process in order to achieve protagonism is about the children gaining control over resources. But it has also another important component – the role of the adult. For satisfactory achievements the process is also about letting go. “We have to define clearly the role of the adult not to get in the way. Unfortunately I think that we, the adults, instead of helping become an obstacle.” (Ileana Gónzales)

### 5.2.3 Spaces for Participation

The spaces and places<sup>8</sup> where participation takes place were defined by the children in the interviews as; projects/movement, school, community, markets and family. This study is limited to participation within the movement. Doing researching on the effects of empowerment on the other spaces and places defined would be an interesting task. The activities of NATRAS aim at educating and preparing the children (Cándida Mendez). The children themselves because of the topic’s constant presence in their working reality chose the campaign topic, sexual abuse. As mentioned above most children go to the national meetings and seminars of NATRAS accompanied by one or several adults (usually social workers) from their projects. The most important advantage found by having the adults present at the meetings and seminars was the possibility of interchanging ideas and knowledge between adults and children.

Observations made when visiting the activities of the NATRAS were mostly related to how children and adults behaved towards each other. A general observation was that the adults take up a lot of the talking time, which contradict their wishes from the interviews of keeping a low profile. The common attitude seemed to be that everyone participates in the meeting on equal terms and the possible power relation between adults and children was not often referred to during the activities. One exception occurred during a lecture on the topic of sexual abuse when the lecturer interrupted the discussion with the message that

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<sup>8</sup> The word *espacio* includes both English words place and space.

the children should express themselves more. In the oral evaluations children were often expressing positive attitudes towards the contents of the meeting while they gave harsh criticism on the practical arrangements around the meeting. The adults on the other hand gave constructive criticism for the programme but did not pay attention to practical issues. It is clear that the children are not comfortable with questioning the words of the adult since the adult is expected always to be right.

During the seminars and meetings with NATRAS all group work is divided by age. Adults coordinating the activities say that they have seen the youngest participate more this way. The children have different opinions about this method. “We do the group work separately and I would like it not to be like that. We should work together to come up with more ideas. But I am new here, I do not know“ (José Luis, 14, Matagalpa). Alexis who has longer experience in the movement thinks both children and adults learn more working separately.

We were divided into groups by our age because we the adolescents and children are going to teach other children and adolescents. The Viatras<sup>9</sup>, like we call them, are going to work with fathers, mothers, teachers, well with adult people. Because sometimes adults do not think that we know anything, that is why we thought it would be better if we share [our knowledge] with children like us. We decided this together. (Alexis, 13, Jinotega)

Dividing the participants in groups related to age is one way of intentionally making power relations become visible. As we have seen the movement provide spaces for participation. However they are not free from hierarchies.

#### 5.2.4 Decision Making

When looking at the formal decision making NATRAS consists of two parts – the children and the adults. “Those who make the decisions in terms of process are the children. We pick up suggestions from the evaluations and form the plan for next year. In terms of political decisions the adults in the association make them. But these decisions must of course be coordinated” (Jamileth Ocampos). This way of making decisions is said to have helped NATRAS not being only in the hands of adults. An example of the informal decision-making will be illustrated by a discussion on how children get to the activities of NATRAS.

As mentioned before many adults consider children’s demands for participation, influence and power as a threat to the position they have today. For example adults encourage for children’s right to participation but do not accept that children choose which adults to accompany them at meetings (Liebel 2000:76). Many children confirm that the adults in their projects have the final word in choosing the children to send to the different activities of NATRAS. Alexis, quoted in 5.2.1, chose the words “we who were *selected*” instead of *elected*. One girl from Ciudad Sandino told me that Kennya and Jhonny were always the first choices for different activities. “It is probably because they are

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<sup>9</sup> Nickname for adults working with NATRAS

cleverer than me,” she said bitterly. But there was a time when NATRAS was run by an operative commission chosen by an assembly of children. These procedures lead to problems partly because of the interference by adults. The CON had absolute power to implement the decisions of the assembly. It turned into absolute power. The CON children turned into an elite. The children were confused by their power. They were not representing anybody. One reason is that they were favoured by adults. Informally adults elected them, since adults choose “their little stars” to represent their project in children’s elections (Jamileth Ocampos).

## 5.3 Individual Level

The empowerment dimensions: resources, agency and achievements will be analysed at the individual level.

### 5.3.1 Resources

The resource dimension in empowerment is most of all a measure of potential choice and not of actualized choice (Kabeer 2001:28). If a child has access to a certain resource, for example education we should not take it for granted that this access would lead to empowerment. We should instead discuss resources in terms of control and in the light of its potential for human agency and achievements (Kabeer 2001:30). The importance of promoting the personal development of the child is stressed by theorists like Hart and Cussiánovich and is reflected in the answers given by both groups of respondents. From the interviews with the children four<sup>10</sup> resources with large importance for the process were identified:

- Support from adults (educators, promoters, teachers, parents...)
- Motivation (interest by the children themselves)
- Self-confidence
- Knowledge

Other resources mentioned by the children were money, recreation, leadership and places and spaces for participation, but these will not be further discussed.

The most important resource for the children seemed to be support from the adults. The built-in contradiction in the empowerment relation as initiated from above upon the powerless has been discussed earlier. Support can take many forms and this relationship has to be more carefully investigated in order to evaluate its empowering potential. Adults working with empowering children had a somewhat different view. The principal resources identified by them were:

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<sup>10</sup> These four were mentioned by more than one child.

- Identity
- Organization (access to places and spaces of participation)
- Education

According to several adults in positions of promoting children's empowerment identity as a working child and identification with the sector of working children are crucial factors. Another important resource, also connected to the institutional framework, is organization. Organization is defined as

spaces of participation, integration of children and adolescents with common interests and characteristics that promote actions in the name of defending and implementing their rights. (Profile NATRAS)

To be organized is to have access to spaces and places of participation, an indicator discussed also at the institutional level. If many of the adults consider preparing spaces and places for the children to participate in as their main task, children on the other hand stress support from adults throughout the process as vital. Knowledge emphasized by the children was by the adults expressed in terms of schooling or education, answers reflecting the different positions from which the two groups watch the empowerment process.

### 5.3.2 Agency

Knowledge gained through lectures and group work on different subjects during the activities of NATRAS will lead to agency. "Those who know more can teach those who know less" (Jordan, 10 Managua) and teaching others what you know will give children a sense of power.

I think we all have power. For example, I am not a teacher but I do a radio programme. I can teach other children although I am a child myself. (Karen, 17, Managua)

When I am transmitting radio programmes or television I feel my power over the population (Elba, 14, Somoto)

As described earlier the children will pass on facts learned at the lectures to other working children in their municipality through radio programmes, workshops or other activities.

The adults pointed out identity as a resource. It is related to self-confidence put forward by the children. If children identify themselves with their surroundings and do not looking at it as an enemy it will strengthen their self-confidence. It will lead to agency when children's abilities to formulate their problems and to act upon them increase.

Part of the empowerment process is all the work we did on identity and self-confidence. The products from that work: children capable of outlining their problems, capable of outlining proposals and capable of realizing their proposals. (Jamileth Ocampos)

A problem with the children identifying themselves with their working sector is that working children often are often looked upon with pity or regarded as thieves. “They are not recognized for their capacities or for the economic support they give to the country.” (Jamileth Ocampos) These problems are structural and should be solved by the government assigning priority to children’s interests in the budget, according to Jamileth.

Participation and protagonism are connected to organization. The resource of organization should in this sense be defined as “the structure, group, association of children that engage in concrete actions and work in an organized way to reach collective goals” (Cussiánovich 2001:19). Since empowerment is not an individual process but a collective mobilization of achievements (see 4.1.2) a child can exercise agency through organization. Within the institutional framework of a movement like NATRAS individual as well as structural changes can be promoted. “If we say something in general the adults will not mind the opinions of children. But if we do this as a movement we will make our voices heard.” (Jhonny, 13, Ciudad Sandino)

If the empowerment work in a satisfying way children feel valuable and get motivated to continue the process. When adults listen to what the children have to say “it is a motivation to continue forward” according to María Teresa, 16 years old from Leon. “One knows that your idea counts”, says Kenya, 12, from Ciudad Sandino. These quotations are examples of how interest and motivation among children themselves will lead to agency and power to make choices.

The examples of adult’s support to the children are many, in a way supportive adults are necessary for the children to be able to gain control over the other resources in order to exercise agency.

### 5.3.3 Achievements

Some structural and institutional achievements connected with children’s participation have been discussed above. Before the process of systematization in NATRAS, due to internal problems, they noted several achievements as a movement. For example addressing to and negotiating with the National Assembly about children’s participation. They also strengthened their identities as children and workers. Working children, a group that used to be invisible, were now recognized to a larger extent.

The seminars where the campaign on the subject sexual abuse was planned were arranged by the adults working with NATRAS as a way of promoting places for participation. Children were taking part in setting up the campaign through the support and encouragement from the adults. As an example of achievement sixteen year old María Teresa mentions the t-shirts used for the campaign. The message and illustration on the t-shirt was decided by the children and were used throughout the campaign.

When asked about achievements they are especially proud of the children give several examples. Children see results from their work with the campaign. There is less violence in their surroundings and changed attitudes towards intra-familial violence. Other examples are a recycling project for a cleaner environment, proposed by the children's council to the municipality of Ciudad Sandino. These achievements as a movement can also be described in terms of individual achievements in the empowerment process. The outcomes of children's choices have led to changes in their lives. Gabriela explains being empowered in terms of personal achievements. "I have advanced a lot, before I was shy now I know that I can talk in front of many people or in an interview like this. I have developed" (Gabriela, 13, Diriamba).

## 5.4 The Power Dimension

The power dimension in empowerment has permeated the discussion of participation in practice at the analytical levels of structure, institution and individual. But from a critical perspective it is also important to comment on the understanding of power by the participants in my study. Bertha Rosa Guerra at OIT/IPEC expressed her worries about associating power with participation in Nicaragua. "To talk about power is dangerous in our society with a history of dictatorships, perhaps in another context I don't know." (Bertha Rosa Guerra) Most of my respondents, children as well as adults also associated power and politics very intimately. This could have affected the answers regarding the concept of power. It makes it easier though since power in Spanish also means *to be able to*. Power was therefore understood as having a double meaning; the power of domination and the power to do something (power over and power to). It could be "the power of the president" but also "the power to change your life". When splitting up the concept of power in a positive and a negative part some of the children still referred to power as *power over* but in a more benevolent way. The division was between *good power* and *bad power*. Several children were also talking about power to, perhaps a consequence of the double meaning of the word in Spanish. A boy who thought it was about domination in both cases made an interesting point. Power over meant domination over others and power to meant domination over oneself. The empowerment relationship contains voluntarism and coercion at the same time (Cruikshank 1999:73). Adults are exercising power while empowering the children. If the empowerment process is successful child protagonism can become potential power, described by Arendt (see 4.21). Communicative action is the route to take, a theoretical description matching the empirical results presented at the individual level (see 5.3)

The moment you are participating in something, you have power. Because you have the power of participating, the power of talking and the power to do something. This power develops as you keep participating. (Roberto, 15, Ciudad Sandino)

Power relationships could be addressed and changed through knowledge, self-confidence, motivation, and support.

We have to share power. It is not a question of moving power from one part to the other but to share it and establish the limits and to know what your competences are. And which are the competences of the others because nobody is empowering the other. (Ileana G3nzales)

It is a question of sharing power, of reaching the top rung on the ladder of participation. To arrive at a point where nobody is empowering the other is desirable. It might be kept in mind as a vision for the future, but is less probable to ever be achieved. In any case it must be preceded by an increased awareness of the power dimension in empowerment.

## 5.5 The Role of the Adult

There are many names when describing the adults in children's empowerment process. Some of the names are closely related to one specific resource. This will only further strengthen the argument that these resources are important. Social workers from the civil society organizations are commonly called *educators*, which originates from the knowledge he or she holds and passes on to the children. A *facilitator* is associated with support by many interview respondents. In the profile document of NATRAS adult facilitator is a recommended title and it is described as:

One who listens, promotes actions, organizes, coordinates, respects, incites, proposes, is available, accepting, motivating, dynamic, tolerant, creative, human, sensitive, share spaces and ideas, is loyal and accompanying. (Profile NATRAS)

To cover all aspects in empowerment a broader name must be used. Facilitator in the definition of NATRAS encompasses most of the resources identified. Promoter of children's participation and protagonism should be used according to Jamileth Ocampos. In this name parents, teachers, social workers and other adults empowering children in the different places and spaces of participation can be included. Another option could be *collaborator*. "Collaborator can be a person who will be there in the moment when he or she is needed and help is asked for in a specific way." (Ileana G3nzales) Many of the children, on the other hand, preferred to call the adult by their names for hierarchies within the empowerment relationship to be reduced. A discussion about the titles and names is connected to making the role of the adult clearer in children's empowerment. Whatever name used it is important to move away from the view of adults always educating children and never the opposite. "You cannot learn from the other if you think you are going to teach him" (Erica Castillo).

Children say they need support from the adults to act as protagonists in their own participation. However they do not consider the interference of adults in the processes uncomplicated. Situations and activities with children only create an atmosphere of equality and manipulation is easier to avoid according to fourteen year old Henry. When it is a mutual initiative between children and adults “they manipulate our words and our ideas and turn them into exactly what they want” says Henry. Fourteen year old Vladimir is not as harsh in his analysis. “They listen to our opinions when it is something achievable, when we ask for something impossible they do not listen”.

Many examples of what can be referred to as adultism have been presented. Adultism is exercised “when one uses his or her position as an adult in a negative way” (Cándida Mendez). Such attitudes and practices should be taken away by re-education. The purpose of re-education is “to understand ones role and the role of the other, how I feel respected and how I should show respect (Jamileth Ocampos). Instead of helping adults are often getting in the way.

We have to be careful and see to it that the working children have their own voice in the practice we promote everyday, that they make demands on the authorities and decision makers of this country. I think it is a slow learning process. (Ileana Gónzales)

Neither children nor adults see separation between age groups as an option for avoiding power relations. Karen, seventeen, gets to sum up the argument that adults should not abandon children’s participatory processes. She would like the relationship between children and adults to be characterized by

sharing ideas, thoughts and attitudes. Children should not only be spending time with other children. In most cases children are by themselves and adults by themselves. I think it should not be like that because in a world of equality we would spend time together, children and adults, interchanging ideas. (Karen, 17, Managua)



## 6 Concluding Discussion

Participation is a right held by all children. The responsibility for implementing the right to participation is assumed by adults. Still, the process of implementing the right to participation is controversial. Traditional views of childhood and the social construction of children as passive has put a spoke in the wheel of the process. Defining children as a powerless group in special need of protection and support is contradictory to children demanding participation and power.

The empowerment process is about changing power relations and increasing the children's possibilities to make choices. Empowerment contains a dimension of power and the empowerment relationship runs the risk of reproducing social hierarchies of domination. Children's own activism with the influence or guidance of adults can be the key to finding fruitful strategies for sustainable empowerment of children. Working children and youth have the potential of bringing changes to the status of children in the world. The Nicaraguan working children's movement – NATRAS promotes child protagonism as a higher level of participation. Agency, the possibility to act on your own interests is added to the concept of participation when discussing child protagonism. The children are protagonists of their participation. Investigating the understanding of the concepts in theory and practice among the children is a way towards measuring if the promotion of protagonism is successful. Different views upon participation and protagonism depend on the children's experiences and their level of integration in the activities. Protagonism is the goal for the participation exercised in the NATRAS movement while the member projects promote participation at a lower rung on the ladder.

The empowerment relationship is dependent on children's knowledge since they are experts on their own situation. This is clear in theory but the practice looks somewhat different. Instead of emphasizing the educating possibilities of children, the children are dependent on the adults providing them with knowledge through a power relationship. In the relationship between children and adults clear roles must be defined; within the structural perceptions about age, within institutions as arenas for empowerment and between individuals in the process. I have not been arguing for or against the involvement of adults in children's participation. However to make power relations become visible in the processes can lead to successful outcomes.

The NATRAS movement has learned a few lessons by trying to force organizational structures upon the children. They ended up in manipulative, unwanted, patterns. After a process of evaluation other ways to go about the empowerment of children are now being tried out. But power relations between children and adults still exist and must be constantly scrutinized. The decision making process is a key to understand how the power of adults is institutionalized

even in a movement claiming to be lead by children themselves. It is difficult to succeed with empowerment if the process is a limited one, only to cover the spaces of participation provided by the movement. The view upon children in society remains unchanged. Individual and institutional changes must therefore be accompanied by efforts towards changed attitudes in society as a whole. The importance of structure and context must not be forgotten. Otherwise the inability to transform other spaces of participation such as the family would mean short-term changes for the children instead of permanent achievements.

Despite some criticism towards NATRAS, the movement and the projects in Nicaragua's civil society are in many ways good examples of a world of working empowerment projects where children, with emphasis on education and discussions, can change their possibilities of making life strategic choices. The children feel powerful when they have the ability to teach other children, it strengthens their self confidence and position in society. To further study the effects of children's empowerment on their roles in the school or the family would be an interesting project. Through this process children can gain control over resources such as knowledge and self-confidence, when their identity is strengthened and they start to claim their rights. Hierarchies between the children and their in many cases less empowered parents might be challenged and teaching methods in the school be questioned.

This study is made on older children and adolescents and the results are valid only for this specific group. However one cannot help speculating that the support of adults and well defined roles between adults and children are at least as important to younger children. An awareness of power relations lowers the risk of empowerment turning into disempowerment.

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## 7.1 Informants

- Adilia Amaya, executive director, Instituto Promoción Humana, INPRHU
- Erica Castillo, programme coordinator, Dos Generaciones
- Mario Chamorro, executive director, Dos Generaciones
- Bertha Rosa Guerra, national coordinator, OIT-IPEC
- Lidia Midence, executive secretary, CNEPTI
- Yvette Fonseca, programme coordinator, Save the Children Norway

## 7.2 Adult respondents

- Ileana Gonzales, president of the association supporting the national NATRAS Movement; executive director, INPHRU – Estelí
- Cándida Mendez, board member of the association supporting the national NATRAS movement; educator, Asociación Las Tias
- Ronald Mendieta, board member of the association supporting the national NATRAS movement; director, APAN – MILAVF Diriamba
- Jamileth Ocampos, executive director, national NATRAS movement
- Fatima Ramos, educator, INPRHU – Managua, Proyecto Roberto Huembes

**Participation and protagonism**

What does participation mean to you?

What is your organization's / authority's experience in working with children's participation in Nicaragua?

What does a child need to be able to participate?

What are the obstacles to children's participation?

Are there limits to children's participation?

What does child protagonism mean?

How is child protagonism achieved?

How can the achievements be measured and evaluated?

**The role of the adult**

What role does the adult play in promoting children's right to participation?

What is the relation between power and participation?

**The Nicaraguan context**

What are the special characteristics of working children when compared with non-working children?

What are the special characteristics of Nicaraguan working children?

In what way does your work change the conditions for the working children in Nicaragua?

What are the biggest changes for working children's in Nicaragua?

What problems are Nicaraguan working children facing in the future?

**Participation and protagonism**

What is your experience in working with children's participation?

What does participation mean to you?

Are there various levels of participation and how do those levels work?

What does a child need to be able to participate?

What are the obstacles to children's participation?

Are there limits to children's participation?

What does child protagonism mean?

How is child protagonism achieved?

How can the achievements be measured and evaluated?

**Opinions and decision making**

How are the opinions of the children being listened to and put into practice in the project / movement?

How does decision making work in the movement/projects?

Would you like decision making to be in another way and why?

**Power**

What is the relation between power and decision making?

How are power relations being demonstrated in the process of promoting children's participation?

How can power relations be changed?

**The role of the adult**

What are you as an adult called in the project/movement? Why?

What is the best name? Why?

What role do adults have in the movement/project?

How would you like relations between adults and children to be?

Which are the advantages and disadvantages of adults participating in the activities of the movement?

**Additional**

What are the greatest achievements in working children's participation?

What are the greatest lessons learned from the systematization process?

What is the next step for the NATRAS movement?

What problems are you facing in the future?

Do you want to add anything?

## *Appendix 3 Focus Groups*

### *Questionnaire*

The discussion in the focus groups was lead around the four topics; participation and protagonism, opinions and decision making, power, the role of the adult.

#### **Participation and protagonism**

- In what do you participate?
- Where do you participate?
- When do you participate?
- How do you participate?
- Why do you participate?
- What does participation mean to you?
- What does child protagonism mean?
- What does a child need to be able to participate?
- What are the obstacles to children's participation?
- Are there limits to children's participation?

#### **Opinions and decision making**

- Are your opinions listened to in the project / movement by the adults/other children?
- Are your opinions put into practice? How?
- How does decision making work in the movement/projects?
- Would you like decision making to be in another way and why?

#### **Power**

- What does power mean to you?
- Who has power in the movement/project/family/community?
- When does one feel powerful?
- What does a person require to obtain power?
- What is the relation between power and decision making?
- How can power relations be changed?

#### **The role of the adult**

- What do you call the adult here in the project? Why?
- What is the best name? Why?
- What role do adults have in the movement/project?
- How would you like relations between adults and children to be?
- Who promotes children's participation best, adults or children?

#### **Additional**

- What have you achieved as a movement of working children?
- What problems are you facing in the future?
- Do you want to add anything?

## *Information about the Focus Groups*

- I Asociación Las Tias, Leon
- II INPRHU, Proyecto Roberto Huembes, Managua
- III NATRAS from the north: La Cuculmecca, Jinotega – INPRHU, Somoto – CESESMA, Matagalpa
- IV Consejo Municipal de niños y niñas – Consejo Municipal de jóvenes – Cantera, Ciudad Sandino
- V Asociación Quincho Barrilete, Managua
- VI APAN-Milavf, Diriamba

# girls	# boys	Total
16	16	32

Age	Ten	Eleven	Twelve	Thirteen	Fourteen	Fifteen	Sixteen	Seventeen
#children	3	3	5	5	10	2	1	3

	–	Primary school						Secondary school					
Grade		1	2	3	4	5	6		1	2	3	4	5
#children	1	–	–	1	2	4	8		6	4	3	1	2