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**CHILDREN, AGENCY AND VIOLENCE:  
IN AND BEYOND THE UNITED NATIONS  
STUDY ON VIOLENCE AGAINST  
CHILDREN**

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# **Children, Agency and Violence: In and beyond the United Nations Study on Violence against Children**

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**Summary:** How has the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) made a difference in the everyday lives of children, particularly those needing special protection? There have been reforms in law policy. There have also been resource allocations, an increase in the number of training and awareness raising programmes, and the development of plans of action for children. However, there is a lack of evidence of the impact of all these actions on the day to day lives of children. Moreover, in the child protection sector in particular, there is a dearth of evaluations of interventions designed to prevent children from being exploited, abused or neglected.

This paper examines the role of child agency as it relates to child protection. The focus arises from recognition that child protection approaches can be ineffective, and even counterproductive, when local context is not given sufficient attention (Bissell et al., 2007). The prevailing child protection models – child rescue, social services and medical models – commonly neglect local community assets, including the role of children themselves. Yet in many cases these assets may play a critical role, particularly when family and community are the primary line of defence to protect children from violence and exploitation. Rethinking child protection from a rights perspective requires building on empirical and theoretical understandings of child agency and child development, and the interactions between them.

Accordingly, the first section of the paper begins by reviewing the literature on child agency, identifying what is understood (or not understood) about child agency in relation to child protection. The term ‘child agency’ highlights how children constantly respond to their environment, and recognizes the contributions of children as agents to their own protection and to their societies. It directs attention to the opportunities afforded to children and their capacities to have an influence.

To contextualize the above discussion in concrete terms, the paper examines the documents and materials produced around the UN Study on Violence against Children (hereafter referred to as the UN Study). The UN Study was selected because: (a) it is identified as the first UN study to “engage directly and consistently with children” (United Nations, 2006a, p. 5), underlining and reflecting children’s status as rights holders; (b) a range of methods were used to collect information internationally over a three-year period; and (c) various stakeholders were involved in design, collection and promotion, including international and non-governmental organizations, and academics. While the intention of this review was to be comprehensive in nature, it is important to note that it was limited to written or audio materials accessible to the author; primary research with children and adult participants was not part of its terms of reference. The review itself also only examines materials produced in preparation for the UN Secretary-General’s Report on Violence against Children and the *World Report on Violence against Children* (United Nations, 2006b), and shortly thereafter; however, the outcomes of the UN Study continue to unfold internationally, nationally and locally,

Aiming to explore child agency, the paper considers the UN Study through a ‘child agency’ lens. The parameters of the UN Study are also taken into consideration, in that, while child participation was identified as an integral element of the study, the overarching objective was to draw an in-depth global picture of violence against children and provide recommendations for the improvement of legislation, policy and programmes. Thus there were many opportunities for civil society, including children, to provide input into the process, and children’s recommendations from the consultation processes were reflected in the overarching recommendations of the study.

In the process of conducting the study, there were several instances where the role of children as actors was brought to the fore. These initiatives undertaken in relation to the UN Study, and others in parallel, were instructive for all involved. Among other things, it is clear that in order to draw on children's agency, and provide opportunities for that agency to be exercised, traditional methods, structures and processes of engaging children need further consideration. Truly embracing child agency requires child–adult partnerships, the reorientation of adults as researchers and decision makers towards more supportive roles, the adoption of more interdisciplinary approaches to working with children, and the creation and application of innovation to bridge the gap between research, advocacy and programming and to uphold children's dignity.

The UN Study demonstrates how children are coping with and negotiating the multiple dimensions of violence in their everyday lives. However few examples of the involvement of children in identifying and implementing solutions to address violence against children are included in the *World Report on Violence against Children*. That said, they were available in supporting documents to the UN Study. In light of the UN Study's limitations and evolving nature, the analysis also raises questions about the interchangeability of child agency and child participation in the child rights community and the disjuncture between the two.

The concluding section of this paper argues that the use of child agency, or its closer realignment to child participation, will help to reveal how child protection initiatives and practices have often failed to recognize the role of context and the environment-dependent nature of child development. Reframing child protection through the lens of child agency recognizes the multifaceted, ever-changing nature of family and societal structures, and draws attention to the individual in relation to the multitude of contextual factors that affect and are affected by the child. Embracing child agency will create opportunities to devise interventions to address violence against children at the individual, collective or proxy levels.

**Keywords:** child participation, child protection, children, children's agency, children's rights, violence

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## **1. BACKGROUND AND SCOPE**

This paper was produced in the context of queries raised by researchers, including from the University of California, the University of Oxford, the University of Victoria and the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, out of an awareness that greater empirical knowledge is needed on the impact of current approaches to child protection. Consistent with studies undertaken around the general measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UNICEF IRC 2006), there is a recognition that, while the CRC has resulted in a number of outcomes for children, there is very limited evidence on the impacts of policies and programming in child protection in terms of children's everyday lives. A pivotal need was identified for evidence-based research.

To better contextualize efforts to reach children needing special protection, the following principles were initially articulated:

1. Interventions should be empirically based to reflect the realities of the situation.
2. Children should be regarded holistically, in terms of both development and a socio-ecological perspective, and should be served by a full range of human rights tools.
3. Protective action needs to mobilize cultural and community assets.
4. Children themselves must participate as important actors in their own protection, and all interventions in their lives need to be in part accountable to them.

Child agency, child protection and child development are considered key concepts in advancing the rights perspective. While knowledge on these concepts has grown in the social sciences, there is a gap in the translation of knowledge into action in the field. This paper was written to contribute to the existing knowledge base on the relationship between child protection and children's active engagement in the shaping of their own lives. Child agency was recognized to be a highly debated concept, but one closely linked to evolving capacities, to the participation of children in all aspects of their lives, and to various articles and intentions of the CRC.

The UN Study on Violence against Children (referred to here as the UN Study) was selected to ground the analysis and discussion of child agency in current programming and perspectives. Given the momentum created by the UN Study, a multitude of materials were made available for review. Access was granted to the database held at the Secretariat of the UN Study based at UNICEF Geneva, and the author reviewed a range of materials, including research reports, toolkits, newspaper clippings, meeting briefing notes, media releases, and child friendly documents. Information posted on websites also served as data, including information from the websites of the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN), which provided a clearing house for the UN Study, and Save the Children Sweden, which posted and published over fifty documents connected to the UN Study.

Secondary sources were the predominant focus of the paper and accordingly limited the analysis. On the one hand, most of the documents were not written with a focus on child agency per se. On the other, materials often pose a challenge to identifying the authenticity of children's voices, and the extent to which organizational agendas help shape documents. In retrospect, primary data collection would have contributed to the paper's rigour.

## **2. ELEMENTS OF CHILD AGENCY**

This section discusses what is understood (or not understood) about child agency as it relates to child protection, bearing in mind that child protection policies and approaches often fail to recognize the child's right to participate, constructing children as immature and vulnerable beings in need of protection.

However, the rights perspective on child protection posits a broader view that calls for a holistic approach to children contextualized by their social ecology, and in recognition of the principles of non-discrimination and accountability (Lansdown, 2005a; Theis, 2004). Of critical importance is the recognition of 'child agency' – of children's role as actors in their own protection and the protection of others, and in the design of child protection policies and interventions (Bissell et al., 2007).

The term child agency is not commonly defined, however, nor used across disciplines, let alone by the child rights community. To address this, the following section reviews the concept of agency as defined generally in the social sciences and more specifically in relation to children and protection. The following elements of child agency are established:

- Child agency is integral to development: children constantly respond and interact with their environment and surrounding structures to develop, and have an intrinsic drive to self-efficacy.
- Child development and culture are mutually defined processes; child agency constitutes the interactive navigating element.
- Child agency is operational at the level of the individual, but is also manifested by proxy and collectively.
- Children exercise agency in giving meaning to violence and responding to violence based on their assessment of local context.
- Contextually dependent, child agency may be either a protective or a risk factor.
- A child agency lens involves paying attention to both the opportunities and the capabilities of children to have influence.
- Enhancing child agency involves building on the assets of the community and children in ways that strengthen opportunities for functioning as an agent at multiple levels.

### **Agency as intrinsic to human development**

To begin with it must be established that agency is intrinsic to human development. Bandura, a leading psychologist, states: "People are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating and self-reflecting. They are not simply onlookers of their behavior. They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them" (2006, p. 164). The recognition of the interaction between humans and their environment represents a paradigm shift from behaviouristic principles, based on a mechanistic view of human behaviour, ignoring the influence of individuals. Underscored by research on brain development, it is clear that the actions of individuals exerting agency shape the neuronal and functional structure of the brain itself (Kolb and Wishaw, 1998).

Reflecting the breadth and depth of the internal mechanisms operating within individuals to bring about desired outcomes, Bandura identifies the core properties of agency to consist of intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Of these four terms, agency is most closely related to intentionality: “To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one’s own actions” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). It refers to people’s conscious choice of a future course of action. At the foundation of human agency is self-efficacy: the belief that one is capable of exercising some measure of control over one’s own functioning and environment. Thus agency is related to the concept of competence (Chawla and Heft, 2002), control (Jackson, Kim and Delap, 2007) and empowerment (Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland, 2006).

In addition to the internal expression of agency, Bandura identifies two other types of agency: proxy and collective. These arise from a recognition that people do not live their lives in individual autonomy, and do not have direct control over conditions that affect their lives. Proxy agency involves influencing others to act on their behalf given other people’s greater expertise, influence or control. Alternatively, collective agency refers to the bringing together of knowledge, skills, attitudes and resources to act in concert to shape the future, reflecting that many changes are only achievable through interdependent efforts. The implications and considerations of external and internal elements of agency are discussed below.

While Bandura and others (see Archer, 2000, 2003) confirm that human agency runs across cultures, there are individual and cultural differences in the expression of agency. Cultures shape “how efficacy beliefs are developed, the purposes to which they are put, and the sociostructural arrangements under which they are best expressed” (Bandura, 2000, p. 77). An individual’s perception of their own efficacy influences thought patterns, actions and emotions, and how they cope with different situations (Bandura, 1982). A person’s beliefs about their ability to have an influence on change are formed as they interact with their environment (Chapman and Skinner, 1989), with the degree of personal control increasing as they perceive themselves as ‘agents’ with the ability to control situations (Pastorelli et al., 2001).

A person’s perception of control over a situation is also influenced by family and community, who play a role in providing the first opportunity for children to discover their efficacy and ‘master’ social, cognitive and linguistic competencies (Bandura and Locke, 2003; Pastorelli et al., 2001). When events occur such as maltreatment, and the person has control over the situation, anxiety around the situation will significantly decrease, and the experience of physical pain may be lessened (Bandura, 1982).

Of significance is a realization that agency both shapes and is shaped by the environment. In other words, agency is socially situated, so that agents operate within the structures they influence, and are influenced by (Bandura, 2006). As identified by Archer, humans exist in relation to their inner conversations, which are defined by the surrounding environment; “Our placement in society rebounds upon us, affecting the person we become, but also and more forcefully influencing the social identities we can achieve” (2000, p. 10). Archer considers agential powers as critical in determining developmental pathways. She points out that the

constraints and enablements provided for by structures are defined by the subjective responses of individuals:

For anything to exert the power of a constraint and enablement, it has to stand in a relationship such that it obstructs or aids the achievement of some specific agential enterprise. The generic name given to such enterprises is 'projects'. Obviously a project is a human device, be it individual or collective because only people possess the intentionality to define and design courses of action in order to achieve their own ends. (2000, p. 5)

Emphasis on the interplay between individuals and environment aligns with Giddens (1984), who argues that a false dichotomy exists between structure and agency, because social action, or agency, and social structure presuppose one another *in the same moment*. Individuals operate within influencing structures that are affected by a range of historical, sociocultural and economic processes. People will weigh their choices, utilizing what they perceive to be the available resources within prevailing norms and values.

Accordingly, people cannot be passive recipients of development: they need to be actively involved. Economist and Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen suggests that development involves "both the *processes* that allow freedoms of actions and decisions, and the actual *opportunities* that people have, given their personal and social circumstances" (1999, p. 17). Sen identifies agency as foundational to people's full and healthy development. Agency comes from being able to exercise the goals one values; it involves having a sense of power and control to make choices (Alkire, 2007). If they are not able to exert agency, people may be alienated from their behaviour, coerced into a situation, and submissive (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The latter requires paying attention to both the capabilities and the opportunities to engage actively and freely. In the context of women's agency, Sen recognizes that giving meaning to women's voice and agency goes hand in hand with addressing women's earning power, economic role outside the family, literacy and education. In embracing agency, what are some considerations for child protection?

### **Child agency and development**

In the academic realm, the recognition of child agency has been described as a 'paradigm shift' in work with children; a stark reminder that children have historically been viewed as helpless and powerless, almost possessing inherent qualities of vulnerability (J. Hart and Tyrer, 2006). According to James and Prout: "Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes" (1997, p. 8).

In other words, children are not only social actors who express their wishes, demonstrate strong attachments, and so on, but are agents whose interactions make a difference to relationships and decisions, and play an active role in negotiating both their own development and that of their societies (Mayall, 2001). Children are intentional, and have influence; agency operates at the internal and external levels.

### *The internal process*

Regarding the internal implications of child agency for child development, evidence from a diversity of fields (anthropology, sociology, psychology and the neurosciences) indicates that childhood is not static, biologically determined, and magically endowed at a certain age.

In accordance, the prominent Russian developmental psychologist Vygotsky (1978) identifies development as a process resulting from the dynamic link between various internal and external stimuli. Child development exists within what he terms the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the tasks that remain too difficult for a child to accomplish on his or her own, but that can be realized with the guidance of adults or other young people. The lower levels of ZPD are those that can be accomplished independently by the child, and the upper levels are those that require assistance, which Vygotsky terms scaffolding. As a child's competence increases, less guidance is provided. Children are maturing and growing, gaining capacity, and the ZPD is the space where these newly forming abilities are created. Vygotsky's ideas have been particularly influential in education (Nieto, 1999), demonstrating how education programmes need to be tailored to the sociocultural environments of children, in the knowledge that humans are predisposed to try new strategies and that these will change and expand as children grow and develop, and their circumstances alter (Vygotsky, 1978).

Woodhead (1999) argues that three elements influence children's development: (1) the physical and social environment; (2) the culturally regulated customs and child-rearing practices; and (3) the beliefs and values of the parents. Put simply, the extent to which children acquire cognitive, emotional, social, moral and physical competencies is derived from both life experiences and circumstances, and a child's ability to navigate across these influences.

In sum, this research shows that children's developmental capacities are determined by biology and psychology, societal expectations, and support, responsibility, and relationship structures where agency functions as mediator.

Child agency is not an innate characteristic that can be traced in a linear, developmental fashion, as a function of the attainment of some specific stage of development (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). Agency varies depending on age, maturity, nature and the environment. Children are constantly negotiating their options based on an assessment of internal and external conditions.

How agency changes across a child's lifespan, and the interaction of context and agency warrant further research. To date there are few longitudinal studies examining the development of agency in children or adolescents, although exceptions include studies by Gergely (2002) and Walls and Kollat (2006) on early childhood. Several other studies examine the impact of different child-rearing practices on children's competence and sense of self-efficacy, but they remain scattered (see Smyke et al., 2007; Morelli, Rogoff and Angelillo, 2003). More concrete, rigorous research grounded in the lived realities of children is necessary.

### ***The external process***

Beyond the role children play in their own development, what is the outward expression and outcome of children's agency?

To date, research demonstrating the multiple dimensions of agency and their interaction remains limited. The focus has predominately highlighted the capacity of children for negotiation, navigation, appropriation and selection (Blanchet-Cohen, 2008). Punch (2001), for instance, studied children's strategies in Bolivia to renegotiate adult-imposed boundaries, showing how children assert their autonomy to gain control over their use of time and space. She considers this process to be critical to the child's transition to adulthood and participation in his or her community. Agency is often expressed overtly, particularly among young children; John (2003) reminds us that childhood fantasies and the use of magical powers to change the world into what one wants are all about power.

Although children's contributions can appear mundane and insubstantial (James and James, 2004), authors argue that children's actions incrementally contribute to societal and policy changes. Notably the systematic and cross-cultural work of Rogoff provides evidence for this argument: "Human development is a process of *people's changing participation in sociocultural activities of their communities*. People contribute to the processes involved in sociocultural activities at the same time that they inherit practices invented by others" (2003, p. 52). Thus, she guards against models of human development that imply a separation between individual and collective processes.

Rogoff considers the participation of humans to be transformative and ongoing, involving the personal, interpersonal and cultural aspects of human activity as mutually constituted processes, whereby people "transform through their ongoing participation in cultural activities, which in turn contribute to changes in their cultural communities across generations" (2003, p. 37). In other words, people are affected by, but also affect their mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem; there is a continual exchange between individuals and their environment. Constantly moving cultural processes are the "efforts of people working together, using and adapting material and symbolic tools provided by predecessors and in the process creating new ones" (2003, p. 51).

While there is an emerging understanding of children as contributors to society, the collective impact of children's agency remains unclear. Drawing on Bandura's typology of agency also posits how individual, proxy and collective agency interact with one another, and contribute to the healthy development of individuals and society. It is recognized that children contribute to 'culture', yet amidst the existing power structures and dynamics of local leaders and other decision makers, how much power do girls and boys really have, and what implications do age, gender and/or social background have? Moreover, what is the role of adults and institutions in promoting children's agency? To truly provide child protection interventions that reflect the lived realities of children and enhance the capacity of children as agents necessitates understanding these fundamental issues. Accordingly, the following discusses child agency as it relates to child protection, in particular violence.

## **Child agency and protection**

To date, the relationship between child agency and child protection remains underexplored; research in the area of agency in relation to child protection, poverty and extreme situations is minimal compared to the large body of research considering agency in the context of education, environment and community development. This is largely connected to the long-standing view that children are inherently vulnerable and in need of protection, and is aligned with the universalistic views of child development and of predetermined stages of child development defined by age (Lansdown, 2005b; Montgomery, Burr and Woodhead, 2003).

Growing research with children and the CRC are however increasingly calling into question child protection frameworks that posit the child as a helpless victim (J. Hart and Tyrer, 2006). In the area of children and trafficking, for instance, there is increasing recognition that children are actively part of the decision-making processes, and that ignoring their involvement would be detrimental (De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2007; Dottridge, 2007; Feinstein and O’Kane, 2008).

A close analysis of ‘protective measures’ shows that these are often derived from a narrow conceptualization of childhood, and normative assumptions that do not take into consideration children’s perspectives (Boyden, 2008; Boyden and De Berry, 2004; Newman, 2005). For instance, school and home are portrayed as the safest place for children, yet these are where children experience the most violence. Or again, the prolongation of childhood may be considered to be in the best interests of the child, yet children may in fact gain from acquiring the independence associated with early adulthood.

Research shows that meanings associated with experiences vary from individual to individual, and from one context to another (Montgomery, Burr and Woodhead, 2003). For instance, it has shown that thresholds for pain differ and in some societies children are actively trained to cope with painful situations. In one society children may be intentionally encouraged to engage in risky activities as they prepare for adulthood, whereas these same practices can be considered fundamentally irresponsible in another (Boyden and Mann, 2005). Thus the abusive or neglectful nature of a practice may be differentially viewed depending on society (Korbin, 2003). Some societies contain more protective and supportive factors than others to mediate or moderate risks associated with bereavement, family separation, and similar experiences.

Like agency, resiliency speaks to the notion that human beings are not passive victims of risk accumulation, but rather that they have the capacity to overcome adverse situations, to adapt, recover and remain strong in the face of adversity (Lemerle and Stewart, n.d; Oliver et al., 2006). Research on the resilience of children and young people identifies participation as a protective factor contributing to a young person’s sense of competency and belonging, reducing the likelihood of depression and hopelessness (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Brockern, 1990; Cook, Blanchet-Cohen and Hart, 2004; Lansdown, 2005a; Werner and Smith, 1982). Where families are breaking down or in crisis, children’s participation can minimize the distress, anxiety, anger, grief, shock and disbelief they experience. In these

instances, the most crucial decisions and actions may lie in the hands of the children and community, particularly in instances where governments do not have decisive influence beyond the provision of an overarching protective legal apparatus.

Given the many pressures in today's world such as globalization and the changing structures of family relationships, there is great value and necessity in the involvement of children to identify their perspectives, and implement prospective solutions (Blanchet, 2002; Kaufman and Rizzini, 2002). For instance, in the area of children and work, sharing of economic and social responsibilities with adults may be most supportive of children's development. Accordingly child protection policies have been adapted to provide children with opportunities to partake in both work and study, with children given broad access to the information and activities available to adults within their communities (ILO, 2002).

However, the adaptation of policies and practices should not be blindly transposed. Rather resilience should be assessed on an individual basis reflective of the child's ecological framework: personal traits, the roles of individual, family, community, etc. Moreover, like development, resilience is a dynamic process varying throughout a person's life; a child who is resilient in one situation may not be in another, and the outcome of resilience will vary depending on context (McAdam-Crisp, 2006).

### **Issues in relating child agency and violence**

Although important, recognizing context, culture and agency can be problematic and this is particularly true when considering violence against children. Often opportunities to express child agency are limited or predefined by dependency and powerlessness. Physical characteristics, and a multitude of other factors including resource distribution, macroeconomic policies, political and patriarchal structures and external forces, shape a child's capacity to act and exert influence. The outcomes of child agency can also further reinforce negative or harmful practices; children are products of their society and inheritors of sociocultural and societal norms.

For example, in many societies corporal punishment may be socially accepted, yet it is a violation of children's rights. Children as products of a society may reinforce practices that compromise dignity, such as gender-based discriminatory practices. Clearly, to respect the rights of children, these practices need to be abolished, yet facilitating this change necessitates creating strategies that reflect the cultural context, and involve and consider the perspectives of children and their communities. Participation, including the right to information (availability of child friendly and age sensitive materials), can also provide opportunities for children to be better prepared to confront and avoid risky or challenging situations by increasing their self-esteem and confidence and fostering their active citizenship.

Child agency can also have negative repercussions, whereby children themselves contribute as actors in crime and violence acts. Often child protection overlooks the involvement of abused and exploited children in drugs and criminal acts, yet research with children and youth indicates that joining street gangs involved in armed violence happens when the personal context offers few options to respond to risk factors that affect livelihood viability, such as

poverty, poor access to education and high levels of unemployment, racism and so on. “Children and youth in high risk environments are more *vulnerable* to joining local armed groups when their *personal contexts* offer few options to *respond to risk factors*, and are susceptible to *influences* that encourage them to join” (Dowdney, n.d., p. 4). When there is domestic violence, abuse or neglect at home, children can fulfil a need for allies by engaging in unhealthy relationships characterized by reckless lifestyles and violence (Theis, 2004; Winton, 2004). In search of identity and belonging, young people join gangs to feel they are ‘a part’ – how can these same needs be fulfilled through child-led organizations that support children’s well-being? Interesting parallels exist to contribute and strengthen the knowledge and enthusiasm for child-led organizations.

Paradoxically, in several arenas greater attention has been paid to children’s perspectives when they are the perpetrators of violence; this is particularly indicative in the context of human security and the fear of the ‘youth bulge’, and the negative outcomes of their collective actions (Blanchet-Cohen, 2006). Anthropological literature also limits attention to children’s own voices and perspectives on childhood and violence, but proficiently considers the views of children labelled ‘perpetrators’ of violence (Korbin, 2003), almost as though a higher competency exists among children who are actors in violence (Dowd, Singer and Wilson, 2006).

The issue of violence and the dual sides of agency bring to the forefront the fact that children’s responses to violence have internal and external dimensions and implications. In enhancing agency, one needs to pay attention to the interactions across the three types of agency to support the healthy development of children and communities. In framing the discussion on interventions, we begin by referring to the CRC.

### **Enhancing child agency in interventions**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) posits both child participation and protection as inherent and indivisible rights: children have the right to partake in and influence processes, decisions and activities that affect them; as well as the right to protection, with a responsibility laid on duty-bearers, including the state and the family (see box 2.1). In practice, there have been inherent difficulties in reconciling protective and participatory rights, and protective rights often override participatory rights.

A closer examination of participation suggests that concurrent definitions of participation exist, with some more aligned to child agency than others, encompassing the internal and external elements of agency. R. Hart’s (1997) ladder of participation, for instance, distinguishes various participation levels, where the bottom rung of the ladder represents non-participation and the highest rung signifies shared decision making between children and adults. Although this understanding helps to push the child participation paradigm, other dimensions exist to child participation, and moreover to child agency. Driskell (2002), for instance, considers an additional element and proposes a visual tool to evaluate efforts to engage children and youth in decision making by measuring two primary dimensions: (1) the power of children and youth to make decisions and affect change; and (2) children’s interaction and collaboration with other people in the community.

### **Box 2.1: CRC articles**

#### **Child participation articles:**

Recognition of children as subjects of rights is expressed, explicitly or implicitly, in a number of articles in the Convention:

- **Article 5:** parental provision of direction and guidance in accordance with respect for children's evolving capacity;
- **Article 9:** non-separation of children from families without the right to make their views known;
- **Article 13:** the right to freedom of expression;
- **Article 14:** the right to freedom of conscience, thought and religion;
- **Article 15:** the right to freedom of association;
- **Article 16:** the right to privacy;
- **Article 17:** the right to information;
- **Article 29:** the right to education that promotes respect for human rights and democracy;
- **Article 31:** the right to play and leisure.

**Article 12:** one of the general principles of the CRC affirms that children and young people have the right to express their views freely in matters affecting them and that their views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, for which they should be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceeding affecting the child, either directly, or through representatives or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

#### **Child protection articles:**

These include:

- **Article 19:** the right to be protected from hurt and maltreatment;
- **Article 20:** the right to special care;
- **Article 21:** the right to care and protection if adopted;
- **Article 32:** the right to protection from work that harms you;
- **Article 35:** the right to protection from abduction, sale or trafficking;
- **Article 36:** the right to protection from any kind of abuse;
- **Article 37:** the right to help if hurt, neglected or badly treated.

Despite the limitations of the interpretation of article 12 in fully embodying child participation, the interpretation of article 5, on the evolving capacities of the child, affords attention to the way participation provides for development; it is both a means and an end in itself. Starting in infancy and continuing throughout the lifespan, human beings have an

inherent drive to engage with other human beings. Involving children enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of decisions and initiatives, meeting children's actual (rather than perceived) needs. Participation gives young people the opportunity to develop problem-solving and decision-making skills: "There is growing evidence that children are capable of exercising agency and utilizing their own resources and strengths in developing strategies for their protection. Furthermore, active recognition of and support for children's engagement enhances their developmental capacities" (Lansdown, 2005b, p. 39).

The recognition of children's inherent drive to participate and the benefits of this participation gives credence to child protection approaches that recognize children as subjects of rights, where intervention programmes need to focus on mobilizing local assets and protective mechanisms to create an enabling environment for children's survival, development, protection and participation (Cook, Blanchet-Cohen and Hart, 2004). Children are no longer to be viewed as 'clients' or 'problems' to be solved, but rather as 'citizens' who need the structural capacity to contribute to their own healthy development and to the broader community (EYA and IICRD, 2004).

In the light of the sensitive nature of violence, the involvement of children needs to be approached carefully. For instance, while national and international law may be the best vehicle for articulating child rights and goals for child protection, governments do not have decisive influence over many of these issues, and most of the crucial decisions and actions are being undertaken by the family and community. Adding to the complexity, parents and relatives are often the abusers or exploiters, and thus it may not always be in the best interests of the child to harshly punish the perpetrators. Thus law needs to reconcile these difficulties and should be combined with other approaches, inclusive of cultural attitudes, behaviour and practices, to effect positive change that improves the lives of children.

In addition, attention needs to be given to the spheres of influence that can effect change, because violence against children often originates in large part from the powerlessness of children (and of adults, for that matter). Strategies must consider strengthening individual, proxy and collective agency and recognize that children and adults must be partners in devising appropriate solutions, cognizant of the evolving capacities of children. Collectively children may become more powerful and effective in conveying their perspectives, but how do adults play a supportive role?

States are the ultimate duty-bearers, but in practice family and community members have the responsibility to take care of children. To make proxy agency effective, education of adults may be critical to building the capacity for agency, whereby working with children as contributing citizens upholds children's dignity. Beyond discrete measures with adults, agency also requires addressing the macro context within which children and adults operate, a reminder that the root causes of violence are systemic and normative.

### **Implications for research**

Recognizing that the design of child protection measures will require the innovative and creative involvement of stakeholders, what role does research play? The CRC has provided

an unprecedented impetus for revisiting conventional approaches to research on children, laying the ground for new child-centred research methodologies (Boyden, 2003; Sabo, 2007). Until recently, much of the research informing children's policy and programmes ignored their views, for several reasons, including (a) the belief that young people are incapable of commenting knowledgeably on their experiences; (b) traditional concern for children's safety; and (c) the predominance of psychologists for whom emotional well-being has been the central focus (see J. Hart and Tyrer, 2006). As a result, children's lives were primarily explored through the views and understandings of adult caretakers or professionals.

Recognition of children's perspectives paves the way for interdisciplinary research and approaches. For instance, "statistics tell the story of violence against children from one perspective, which is important, but is only part of the story. The other part is the story told by children themselves. This cannot be measured and presented statistically in graphs and figures: it needs a different kind of language" (Egg et al., 2004, p. 3). Furthermore, Boyden warns against the use of instruments that have been refined by the adult, drawing on the positivist paradigm that "says more about the preconceptions of the researcher than the perspectives or the actual experiences of children" (2003, p. 18).

To draw on children's perspectives necessitates the use of 'participatory' research methods, and this growing application is premised on the notion that the people whose lives are being studied should be involved. It reiterates the need for involvement to define research questions and actively engage stakeholders in data collection and analysis. Specifically, in the area of violence, participatory research helps to afford children opportunities to devise and employ self-protective mechanisms, and also decreases inequalities of power between children and adults. As such, children's active participation in research is a means both to improve the quality and relevance of the data *and* to produce more appropriate responses to violence against children (Ennew and Plateau, 2004).

Thus children's involvement in research can potentially benefit everyone, resulting in better programme development and policy making overall. Alongside innovation, care must be taken to ensure integration of research and programme development, maintaining rigour while also keeping children at the centre and ensuring research is not co-opted by advocacy.

In the light of the implications and dimensions raised above, this paper now shifts to examine the UN Study through a 'child agency' lens.

### **3. OVERVIEW OF THE UN STUDY**

Resulting from a recommendation made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, at the General Day of discussion on Children and Violence, a global UN study was conducted by an independent expert, Professor Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, to document the magnitude, incidence and consequences of violence against children, together with prevention strategies, and propose concrete recommendations for the improvement of legislation, policy and programmes to respond to and prevent such violence. The UN Study was conducted between 2003 and 2006 and culminated with the launch of the United Nations Secretary-General's Report on Violence against Children presented in October 2006 and with the launch of the *World Report on Violence against Children* in November 2006 (United Nations, 2006b). As part of the UN Study a range of initiatives were carried out.

- A detailed questionnaire was sent to all governments, to which 137 responses were received by the end of the UN Study.
- National consultations were undertaken at the country level with children and other experts, resulting in national and regional plans.
- Participation of children and young people took place in local, national and international forums, including consultations, thematic meetings, websites, surveys, etc.
- Nine regional consultations were held in the Caribbean, South Asia, West and Central Africa, Latin America, North America, East Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East and North Africa, Europe and Central Asia, Eastern and Southern Africa.
- Public document submissions were received from nearly 300 individuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other organizations.
- Research reports were commissioned specifically for the study.
- Expert and thematic meetings were held on subjects ranging from violence against the girl child, refugees and other displaced children, and children with disabilities, to violence in schools, home and family, and methodologies to measure violence.
- Field visits and presentations were made by Professor Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, appointed independent expert directing the UN Study, in launching the report.
- Global, regional and national launches were held for the report.

The UN Study involved a broad range of stakeholders (see Save the Children, 2006b, and the concept paper, UN Study, 2003). At the level of the UN, three entities were officially identified as lead organizations: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); World Health Organization (WHO). Professor Pinheiro was appointed by the UN Secretary-General to serve as the independent expert responsible for the UN Study. There was also an NGO Subgroup on Children and Violence for the CRC and an NGO Advisory Panel consisting of 24 individual child rights experts from around the world, including youth. Several professional associations also contributed to the UN Study, including the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN).

In essence, the UN Study served not only to raise awareness globally and locally of the nature and consequences of, and the factors in, violence against children, but also to increase

understanding and create new partnerships and commitments for the key stakeholders and beyond. The following describes the opportunities for child participation in the UN Study.

### **Children in the official documents**

Several of the UN Study's official documents recognize children not only as competent actors, but also as part of the solution to address violence. Specifically, the concept paper (UN Study, 2003) identifies the roles children can play as observers and researchers in the planning, analysis and disseminating stages; it acknowledges the need for children to define violence as it relates to them; and Paulo Pinheiro also made a commitment to explore more meaningful and significant child participation methods. Furthermore, the need to recognize cultural specificities is identified, noting that culture cannot supersede respect for the CRC principles. Lastly gender is seen as a fundamental component of the UN Study, identifying the role of men and boys as advocates against violence and as 'agents for change' (UN Study, 2003).

The *World Report on Violence against Children* (henceforth the Report), submitted three years later, presents the ecological model as the basis for understanding the factors relating to violence (including risk factors and protective factors), giving consideration to the individual, his or her relationships, community and society, and depicts the diagram previously utilized in the *World Report on Violence and Health* (2002). Moreover, the environments encompassing childhood serve as an analytical framework for the Report, and those settings considered most significant to children, including home and family, schools, care and justice systems, workplaces and the community, are addressed at length.

### **Influence on the Report**

Examining the UN Study from the perspective of child agency begs the question: to what extent did children influence the Report? In its formal recognition of children as actors, the UN Study reflects a new era that builds on the 2002 UN Special Session on Children, where formal protocol was broken and the participation of children was seriously considered – a stark contrast to the report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children undertaken by Graça Machel a decade earlier (Ennew, Hastadewi and Plateau, 2007).

As such, the Report contains two overarching recommendations that pertain directly to child participation: numbers 7 and 8. The former highlights affording support and encouragement to children's organizations and child-led initiatives, and the latter deals with the need to create accessible and child friendly reporting systems and services. Periodically, the participation of children is identified as a critical component of programming, providing concrete examples of programmes worldwide where children are involved. Scattered throughout the report are also text boxes summarizing children's perspectives on issues, and examples of children taking action to address violence. And the chapter on violence against children in workplaces most openly and significantly recognizes children as competent social actors, stating: "Participation should consist not only of systematic consultation with children and their families from the data-gathering stage through programme implementation and

evaluation, but should also include enabling them to use their own considerable powers of agency” (United Nations, 2006b, p. 261).

The UN Study also has its gaps, and according to Save the Children’s *Summary Analysis Report* comparing the Report and the views and recommendations of children, the Report fails to “give enough focus on the importance of engaging and involving children and young people in developing and implementing solutions. The importance of children’s participation (and association) should be highlighted in each setting (e.g. homes, schools, care settings, work and community)” (Save the Children, 2006a, p. 4).

The Report is also limited in its ability to address the complexities of children’s participation, such as the dual sides of agency. It lacks a discussion on how boys and girls who experience violence in the family are socialized to violent behaviour and are more likely to become perpetrators of violence. There is also little emphasis on the need and value of involving communities, including adults, to design strategies that build on community assets to address violence. In identifying research gaps, the emphasis is on the need to rigorously collect data that measure the magnitude of violence against children rather than the role of applied research in mitigating and preventing violence.

Although early on the Report mentions child participation, it highlights formal mechanisms and structures that afford child participation, giving little attention and discussion to children’s evolving capacities, and the value of involving both young and older children. This discrepancy reiterates the notion that child agency and child participation are not necessarily interchangeable terms, and reflects the bounded acceptance of children’s contribution to protection and societies as a whole.

Recognizing that all the documents did not make it into the Report, this paper undertook a review of all the materials made available to the author through the internet, or the UN Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children. The next section examines the consultations in which children participated and the other studies and initiatives undertaken on specific issues such as physical and humiliating punishment, child sexual abuse and exploitation, children in conflict with the law, and gender-based violence, and other public submissions (also see above). How are these informative through a child agency lens? The examination of children’s involvement in the UN Study undertaken below speaks to addressing issues of methods and of processes for children to exercise agency, and an analysis thereafter of children’s perspectives on violence against children brings to light how children practise agency in their everyday lives to cope with violence.

#### **4. METHODS, PROCESSES AND CHILD AGENCY**

Need for a new ‘paradigm’ for treating and bringing up children. Certain behaviours, everyone agreed, are ‘just not right’. There needs to be new approaches to relationships, communication, discipline, power and authority. The challenge is to identify how this can happen and who can contribute to it. Clearly children themselves must be seen as active agents in this and in other actions to end violence. Are adults willing and able to make this a reality?

Europe and Central Asia consultation

The following examines children’s participation throughout the consultations and also in the context of research. It highlights the significant role the consultations played as the principal mechanism for children to influence national, regional and international recommendations for addressing violence against children, and draws attention to how research approaches contribute to the concept of child agency in the context of violence against children, and call for innovation and creativity.

##### **Regional consultations**

As mentioned earlier, the UN Study included nine regional consultations with children around the globe, and although extremely varied, these regional consultations were considered to be unique in integrating meaningful and effective participation of children at all stages. Thus the UN Study has been posited as a mechanism to raise the bar in the context of children’s involvement in national and international processes. Yet, in light of this, what can we learn about children’s agency from the consultation experience, and the extensive wealth of preparatory materials and coverage of children’s participation?

##### ***Significance of consultations***

The consultations were *intentional* in creating spaces for children to discuss issues affecting them. They also created opportunities for children to meet with other children and adults and reach out to decision makers to facilitate change. Despite these benefits, the impact of the consultations was limited by the notion that they were not always grounded in the everyday lives of children. However, in most consultation meetings children raised and presented the issues which had been discussed in their communities and during national consultation processes. In many societies, the concept of discussing with children and adults in a setting outside the home and immediate community is foreign or seems abstract to both children and adults, particularly around a sensitive topic like violence.

Despite this shortcoming, it is with the lens of ‘potential’ that the consultations are examined, with the measure of success of a consultation largely based on the decision maker’s intention and actions to (a) take the recommendations of the children forward; (b) include them in policies and action plans; and (c) follow up and involve children who participated in the process. The level of success is also dependent upon the preparatory process prior to the consultation (in their home countries) and post-consultation follow-up

with children at a national and community level. This latter consideration is still evolving and thus could not be examined in the context of current report.

To guide the ethical and meaningful participation of children in the UN Study, Save the Children took on a leadership role (Save the Children, 2006b). As an international NGO with regional offices around the globe, Save the Children identified the UN Study as a rare opportunity to break the “conspiracy of silence” and represent “a major platform upon which to create a groundswell of public and private interest” (Bond, 2006, p. 6) around the neglected area of violence against children. As a result, Save the Children spearheaded the production and dissemination of preparatory documents, submissions to the UN Study (on physical and humiliating punishment, child sexual abuse and exploitation, children in conflict with the law, and gender-based violence) and recommendations to the UN Study’s coordinating committee. In addition, Save the Children documented good practices of child participation (the role varied depending on regional capacity, the expertise of other organizations forming the local steering committees, and for other reasons).

### ***Child participation in the consultations***

Child participation at the consultations was multifaceted, occurring in preparatory meetings, children’s forums and the regional consultations themselves (see table 4.1). Over 260 girls and boys participated in the children’s forums, and a much greater number of children were also involved in the preparatory stages within most regions and countries. In the preparatory stages, a variety of methods were used depending on the country and the local context.

Although children were increasingly involved in the consultative process, an appraisal of child involvement in the formal processes shows uneven appreciation of consultation, reflecting quantitative differences such as meeting length and number of children involved, and qualitative differences encompassing design and the level of child participation (Feinstein, 2005). Accordingly some child participants felt included: “At this conference children and adults are participating as equal partners” (Europe and Central Asia), whereas others felt they had little involvement: “I feel there was minimal participation ... When you have young people only making a presentation at the end, how do we know that what we said was taken into account?” (Eastern and Southern Africa; interestingly, Save the Children and other NGOs withdrew from this consultation for ethical reasons, as the process in this region did not allow for a good preparatory process for children). Based on the diversity of consultations and the available documentation, the following points are discussed:

- child friendly information and child protection;
- representation;
- children’s involvement in all stages;
- the impact on decision makers.

These elements are examined to reflect on the experience of the consultations and identify a framework to support and enable children to be recognized as key stakeholders in research, programming and policy making, and hence be agents of change.

**Table 4.1: Comparison of regional consultations for the UN Study**

**(a) Regional pre-consultations**

	<b>How children were involved<sup>a</sup></b>
West & Central Africa	5000 children from 10 countries. Two children participated in Steering Committee. Conducted own Violence against Children studies.
North America	20 focus groups (250 children). Online survey and collection of existing research.
Latin America	2000 boys and girls in 17 countries through 196 focus group discussions.
East Asia & Pacific	National consultations (10) with children participating in most of them.
Europe & Central Asia	Two young people on child participation working group.

<sup>a</sup> Sources for all three sections of table 4.1 include the report 'Influencing the United Nations on Violence against Children' (Save the Children, 2006b).

**(b) Children's Forums**

	<b>Length</b>	<b>Lead facilitator</b>	<b>How many children?<sup>b</sup></b>
Caribbean	1 day (9 Mar. ) and 4 day workshop post-consultation (14–19 Mar.)	UNICEF	29 (pre) and 50 (post)
South Asia	2 days (17–18 May)	Save the Children, Plan International, UNICEF	25 (12 boys, 13 girls from 7 countries)
West & Central Africa	3 days (19–22 May) <sup>c</sup>	Save the Children Sweden	25
North America	1.5 days	Save the Children Canada, UNICEF, Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates	22 (28 according to North America consultation document)
Latin America	No formal consultation with young people	n.a.	30 children Argentina
East Asia & Pacific	2 days (11–12 June)	Save the Children, UNICEF, and other focal agencies	26 (2 delegates from each country)
Middle East & North Africa	3 days (24–26 June)	Save the Children	27 or 28 (14 girls and 14 boys)
Europe & Central Asia	2.5 days	Save the Children	24 (10 boys and 14 girls)
East & Southern Africa	2 days (16–17 July)		55

<sup>b</sup> The number of children participating is not consistent from document to document, i.e. The *Act Now!* document (Save the Children Sweden, 2005a) says that 29 young people participated, yet the *Voices of Caribbean Youth Report* and the *Regional Consultation Report* (UNICEF, 2005a) indicates that 50 young people aged between 15 and 20 participated.

<sup>c</sup> Young people made demands – to meet with Pinheiro, 1.5 hours to present work, recommendations included in main recommendations and representative on drafting committee.

**(c) Regional consultations**

	<b>How many adults?</b>	<b>How young people were involved</b>	<b>No. countries signing declaration</b>	<b>Outcome document reflects youth concerns?</b>
Caribbean	145	Presented declaration and recommendations.	4	
South Asia		Presented collage of activities – drama, singing, drawing; appealed for attention. Prepared a statement and declaration.		
West & Central Africa	250	Member of drafting committee. Presented 1.5 hour exposé. Provided a statement and recommendations. Given opportunity to react to presentations. Met with Pinheiro.		Yes
North America	200	Presented 3 skits. Presented a statement and recommendation. During opening and closing, had opportunities to present problems and solutions related to violence against children.		Yes (a strong commitment to children’s participation, and the actual outcomes were profoundly influenced by their participation).
Latin America		A declaration and role play was presented. Experiences from consultations presented by Save the Children. Talked to Pinheiro, 1 representative attended press conference.		
East Asia & Pacific		Only consult where youth were full delegates. Presented declaration and recommendations. Part of media team. Part of drafting committee.		Yes
Middle East & North Africa		Presented a youth statement, proposed plan of action, recommendations. Met with Pinheiro. Youth may have also made a presentation after each plenary (Voices of children). <sup>d</sup>		Commit to engaging young people, with the recommendations separated – children and adults.
Europe & Central Asia	300	Acted out situations and asked adults to react. Put adults on the spot in Q&A. Prepared draft outcome document. Prepared statement and presentation.		Yes
East & Southern Africa		Developed statement and recommendations: the young people were not at the presentations on day 2. Pinheiro talked to young people.		

<sup>d</sup> Save the Children didn’t feel that participation was satisfactory, although young people indicated they felt it was the first time they were involved.

### ***Child friendly information and child protection***

The regional consultations recognized the need for both children and adults to be well informed, and this notion was promoted from the outset: “Children are agents and can participate in social change. However, for this adults need to involve children in various processes that concern young persons and children” (Feinstein, Karkara and Laws, 2004). The latter sentence identifies adults as key allies to facilitate children’s ability to exercise agency, embodying the principles of information and provision, which have been identified as prerequisites to enable children to exercise power (Ennew, Hastedewi and Plateau, 2007).

Numerous documents were thus produced to support children’s meaningful involvement, and two Save the Children toolkits deserve specific recognition: *So You Want to Consult with Children?* (2003) and *So You Want to Involve Children in Research?* (2004). Through UN agency–NGO collaboration in the East Asia and Pacific region on minimum standards for children’s participation, reflecting a two-year period and 10 written drafts, 27 statements were identified describing minimum expectations for adult–child behaviour and actions, and consultations with children (Veitch and Buala, 2007). Subsequent to eight months of monitoring, evaluation and reflection on the minimum standards, a final document was produced to establish protocols for children’s participation, including application forms, media briefings and information for accompanying adults (Veitch, 2005). Interestingly, despite all of this, the final documents were fully used only by South-East Asia; in other regions they adopted this version and employed the practice standards established by Save the Children (2005a).

In addition to the development of documents to guide the process of child participation, child friendly documents, for the first time, accompanied most of the official documents. These provided a contextual framework for children to understand the UN Study and presumably exercise their agency. Among others, Save the Children produced general child friendly documents on the UN Study entitled *What is the United Nations Study on Violence against Children: Questions and Answers for Children and Young People on the UN Study on Violence against Children* (in May 2005) and *Safe You and Safe Me* (Karkara, Jabeen and Bhandari, 2006), and the Secretariat of the UN Study on Violence produced the child friendly version of the Report and its corresponding activity booklet. These tools sought to summarize the role of the UN Study and its main components, outline the involvement of children, and facilitate learning and actions by children respectively. Several films were also produced, including *Children’s Voices against Violence against Girls and Boys in South Asia* and a global film on children’s actions to stop violence that involved children.

Aside from the many summary documents, briefing packages were also prepared for child delegates; in some regions, the documents adopted an official look, as in a booklet on the East Asia and Pacific consultation (*What’s All This about the UN Study on Violence against Children Regional Consultation East Asia Pacific?*), and a report was produced documenting the children’s preparatory meeting in New York in May 2006 (when children from all regions met to provide comments on the draft recommendations of the UN Study, preparing for the launch of the UN Study; Bhandari with Feinstein, 2006). Lastly, a report also described

children's preparations for and involvement in the launch, including the launch of the child friendly material (Karkara, Jabeen and Bhandari, 2006).

The effectiveness of these documents is hard to assess, as an appraisal requires speaking to children themselves. In some cases the materials were field tested with children (i.e. *Safe You and Safe Me*), yet this was limited, and often children's input was accessed through established organizations. As we move forward it will be interesting to examine a range of child friendly print and visual materials and to evaluate their usefulness (Save the Children planned to do this). Does introducing larger fonts, simpler language, graphics, space and glossaries make documents more accessible to children? Additionally, how are children using and learning from the materials, and are they supporting children's agency rather than just being shelved as good organizational outputs?

Alongside the need for children to be well informed during the consultations was the concern for protection, the establishment of ethical standards and the creation of a safe environment for children to participate. Given the sensitive subject matter of violence, this was of the utmost importance, and repeatedly had to be articulated given a perceived schism between child participation and child protection rights. In each of the consultations, mechanisms were established to address the safety of delegates, including having an accompanying adult, guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of accompanying adults, and focal persons at the event who were identified as concerned with child protection. Despite the mechanistic interventions, little information is available to evaluate the impact, particularly in regard to support after the events.

Giving a voice to children and a space to share experiences in public forums can leave children 'vulnerable', even though children in the consultations did not share their individual experiences of violence. Children were selected by their peers to participate as experts on the subject, for instance, children who had taken action against violence. Providing support to children once they return home to continue processing their experiences is critical, and this responsibility rests primarily with international and local NGOs. Although circumstances differ with longer term programming, similar questions arise about ongoing support.

### ***Representation***

Who participates in the consultations is an important question. Past consultations have been criticized for the selection of educated or urban elite children, often over 18, who have little (or no) first-hand experience of the issue at stake. In recognition, the selection criteria for the UN Study stated that participants should be experts under 18 and have life experience – described by work in or with an organization, or in community school activities addressing the issue of violence against children (Veitch and Buala, 2007). Accordingly, most of the consultation participants ranged between 13 and 18 years of age, and had previously demonstrated their capacity to speak on their concern for violence. For instance, application excerpts from child delegates in the East Asia and Pacific consultations included: "I participated in a national TV live show about violence against children on International Children's Broadcasting Day; I had organized children's councils at district level ... we had organized training for working children and poor children." In addition, realizing from past

consultations that language often limits participant diversity – particularly deterring those discriminated against or excluded – the consultations did not prioritize a working knowledge of a dominant language.

It is to be noted that, when possible, peer selection also occurred at all levels – from the national and regional meetings, to the launch of the UN Study in New York. Evaluating the launch, children commented on the process, suggesting: “It was excellent. In retrospect, anyone of the participants could have taken on any of the representative roles but it was great to let us decide the process and let us vote” (Bhandari with Feinstein, 2006, p. 33). It is clear that lessons learned from previous consultations had been incorporated.

While there are constraints (financial and human) on the selection of child participants for consultation meetings, it is important to recognize that the children and their backgrounds inform the nature of discussion and the recommendations put forward. In this light, the fact that younger children are minimally represented suggests an absence of their voices and perspectives. Save the Children (2006b) suggests the over-representation of teenagers and the lack of diversity among participants can be attributed to funding and the limited number of participants, yet research demonstrates that children have the developmental capacity to participate at a very young age (Clark, Kjørholt and Moss 2005). In recognition, how can we ensure programmes informed by consultations incorporate varied and diverse perspectives? Young people participating in focus groups in Canada make the point: “You need to get representation from all groups of kids. The popular kids and the bad kids, older kids and younger kids” (Covell, 2006, p. 30).

Nevertheless, bringing in young people at more formal levels of decision making may be most effective for consultations provided that they are not presumed to be representative of all children in the country, and that parallel processes are conducted to address the gap. For instance, through the pre-consultation processes at the national level a diversity of perspectives were captured. In Latin America the voices and opinions of over 2000 boys and girls from 17 countries were captured (many of whom had never had the opportunity to express themselves in this way before), and in Canada focus groups were held across the country, randomly selecting 250 young people from classrooms and special target populations. Whether each child participating in the alternative processes felt they were agents of change, rather than merely informers, remains to be seen, yet a diversity of voices was captured.

### ***Children’s involvement in all stages***

Much is said about involving children and young people in all stages of decision making. In consultations, for instance, there is planning, design, the actual event, evaluation, analysis, documentation, and of course implementation. The latter is in reality the most important measure of the success of consultations, but too often the focus is only on one or two steps. If children are to be agents of change, we need to consider the involvement of children at all stages.

As this was a UN-led study, opportunities for civil society, let alone children, to be involved in the planning stages of defining the process were limited. Europe and Central Asia, and North America were the only two regions where children and young people were involved in the working group on child participation (Feinstein, 2005).

In designing and conducting the meetings, children's involvement was also restricted. Participants suggested that in the future young people should lead or be involved in setting up more sessions, rather than just being 'allowed' or invited to lead a session on child participation, and in an evaluation of the Europe and Central Asia consultations held in Ljubljana, children commented: "Outcomes were adult generated, adult led and adult dominated but many young people get involved because they want to be involved in decision making"; "Decision making decisions were already made for us!"; "Putting words in our mouth and making decisions for us" (Feinstein, 2005).

Children can also contribute in the analysis and writing of the outcome documents of consultation meetings. In the UN Study, children were involved in drafting recommendations presented at the formal meetings, yet they were rarely involved in the analysis and reporting of the outcome document of the consultation meeting. Seemingly only young people in West Africa and Canada were involved in the analysis and writing. In the latter, children analysed transcripts from over 20 focus groups, and discussed emerging themes over a one-month period. A young person also authored the report on the Ontario Youth Roundtable Discussions on Violence (Ma, 2004).

The experience of the consultations also speaks to the importance of embedding evaluation processes that provide children with a space for critical reflection and feedback, and enable adults to reflect and incorporate suggestions in subsequent events. The European consultations are a case in point, where meetings one year later on Building a Europe for and with Children (Council of Europe, 2006), held in Monaco, addressed many of the children's critiques. The format and design of the meetings allowed for greater involvement of the children. Unlike in Ljubljana, where only one session was entirely developed and led by children, Monaco provided several opportunities, and nearly all sessions were interactive. Children eagerly commented that "every participant was very active compared to the event in Ljubljana."

### ***The impact on decision makers***

Ultimately, the aim of the UN Study was to eliminate violence against children, and the consultations provided opportunities for children to make recommendations and connect with decision makers. What was the outcome and result of these connections and interactions?

According to a Save the Children report, the participation of children helped to convince the independent expert of the UN Study, Professor Pinheiro, of the importance and usefulness of children's participation. In the preface to *Children's Actions to End Violence against Girls and Boys* (Karkara and Jabeen, 2005), he states: "These examples show that adult support is important, but that given the space and opportunity, children themselves have a lot to offer!" Aware of the importance of speaking to Professor Pinheiro, children explicitly requested

meetings with him. West Africa serves as a case in point, where the children asked for a one and a half hour meeting to present their work to Pinheiro.

The involvement of children in the meetings also had an impact on adults' perspectives. The coordinator of a children's rights project in Gambia acknowledged:

Before the meeting, I was very reluctant about children's participation. For me it was only a buzz-word but what I have seen and heard during these three days has convinced me that children are key actors for the implementation of their rights. Believe me or not, this workshop has changed my mind. (Karkara and Jabeen, 2005)

The consultations created a space for adults to experience first-hand children's capacity; they brought together decision makers and children as experts, allowing for conversations beyond the realm of the 'everyday'.

On several occasions, children were also given the opportunity to address questions to country representatives. Reports from the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) are titled: 'Children Intervene to Address the Real Issues that Affect Them' or 'Participation: Young delegates put governments on the spot'. In the Europe and Central Asia consultations, children asked representatives direct questions about actions being taken to stop violence against children, and the involvement of children in decision making.

Representative responses often spoke to the lack of children's involvement in decision making: "Not yet, but we are working on it"; "child participation should be developed further" (6 July 2005). In turn, country representatives asked the young delegates questions, and although this unearthed some residual scepticism, it also reflected an openness to engage. The closing comment by a young delegate reflected children's awareness of current gaps: "Children should be heard as I am not sure there are a lot of opportunities for them. NGOs and governments are not cooperating enough" (CRIN, 2005c).

On several occasions, children emphasized adults' role as duty-bearers, speaking on their need for adult support. "We, as children," they said, "do not have the power to realize our hopes and those of thousands and rather millions of Arab children to prevent acts of violence against us. Therefore, we wish to confirm the importance of our partnership with you" (Middle East and North Africa consultation). Children recognize the capacity of adults to bring about change in ways that children cannot, yet this must take place within a context where children (who are primarily the victims of violence) are engaged to determine an appropriate course of action (CRIN, 2005c). Pinheiro also highlighted the role of adults in making a difference: "We [UNICEF, NGOs] have so many good contacts, perhaps we could help children delegates to have access to a certain level of people in government" (CRIN, 13 July 2005, question time).

Effectively achieving proxy agency, however, does not depend only on the involvement of other players, it also requires that these players believe in the capacity of children. In 'Just Listen to Me: Youth voices on violence', the young people state: "the opinions and experiences" of young people must be "given credence and value," yet "we join committees, or work for agencies and then are relegated to positions of little or no authority" (Ma, 2004,

point 9). Yet the UN Study spoke to the challenge of adults recognizing children's competency, in reflections on the Ljubljana experience:

as adults we need to recognize more that often we need to 'let go', stand back and let processes flow. We need to see, but above all, believe in the strengths, capacities, competencies and wish of children and young people to lead their own processes as they do in their own organizations, groups, clubs, forums and networks. (Feinstein, 2005)

Thus recognizing children's agency requires a "transformation of the 'mindset' of societies," as called for in the Report (United Nations, 2006b, p. 6), and encompasses valuing the experiential knowledge of children to engage, plan, implement and identify solutions. It involves providing children with the space and the opportunity to influence others to help bring about change on their behalf; and it is about developing child–adult partnerships that build skills and resources to act in concert to eliminate violence against children in the long term.

### **Innovation in research**

In addition to the consultations, the issue of children's participation was raised throughout the research studies undertaken. The UN Study provided a unique opportunity for innovation and the creation of partnerships among children, academics and international and non-governmental agencies.

Repeatedly, the lack of capacity to capture the breadth of violence against children from the perspective of children themselves was identified (see Masud Ali, 2005; Delany, 2005; Dorning, 2002; Kabir, 2005; Naker, 2005). Naker suggests that the lack of appropriate information resulted in "many of the responses to violence against children [being] ad hoc and sometimes even counterproductive" (2005, p. 2). In response, several studies employed multifaceted methodologies involving first a review of secondary sources (literature, research and best practice review), followed by primary research with children, parents and communities through interviews, focus group discussions, surveys and other participatory tools.

### ***Use and contributions of participatory tools***

Recognizing the value of children's perspectives, researchers and devisers of programmes are increasingly turning to participatory means to use indirect data collection and other methods in an ethically responsible way (Ennew and Plateau, 2004; see also box 4.1). For instance, instead of the child reliving the experience, a character in a drama or a puppet can live the past and the pain. Specifically, RAPCAN (2003) used puppetry as a tool for children (between 8 and 12 years of age) to enable them to speak freely about abuse, and at the conclusion of the puppet session, children were telling their own stories. Puppetry served as a segue for the children to talk, helping to establish a level of comfort and control. In other instances, role play has been used as a tool for discussion, addressing, for instance, how puppetry or dramatization reflects the realities and proposed strategies for preventing abuse against children (Kabir, 2005; Naker, 2005).

**Box 4.1: Benefits of ‘participatory’ data collection approaches**

- Activity driven and experiential in nature
- Allows child to be both researcher and subject
- Transparent methods
- Provides choice
- Exhibits intentionality
- Provides a reversal of roles and joint learning through interpretation (thus children played a critical role in the analysis and understanding)
- Fosters child and adult partnerships (collection, interpretation and use of information)
- Appreciates children as citizens
- Challenges the traditional model, reversing many assumptions about expertise and authority
- Empowering

*Sources:* Egg et al., 2004; Cook, Blanchet-Cohen and Hart, 2004.

Throughout, the need for sensitivity to cultural context in choosing techniques is required. For instance, when conducting research in Colombia and Brazil on child abuse, body maps were used to identify areas of abuse (Cuadros Ferre, 2005), and this proved to be particularly difficult, with children who had been abused demonstrating discomfort with the images. The closeness between man and woman was viewed as a threat or danger. The need to ensure appropriateness across cultures is of particular concern as international agencies adapt methods devised for one culture to another cultural context.

Journals of autobiographical experiences have also proved successful, and were particularly fruitful when working with student teachers and their childhood memories of violence (Chege, 2006). Through diaries, the teachers were afforded the opportunity to explore past experiences of violence during their own life cycle from early childhood to young adulthood. Despite its success with adults, the appropriateness of using journals with younger children is less clear.

Further, photography is an alternative method to capture child perspectives (Egg et al., 2004), and was adopted by SOS Children to investigate violence against children. Utilizing a point of view based on strength and appreciation, the children were asked to reframe violence through evoking the conditions of happiness, to imagine the absence of violence and photograph the most positive aspects of their lives, including the things (peoples and places) they loved, where they felt protected and secure, and the things that were fun. The study sought not to “add to the accumulated evidence on violence against children but to try and turn the instruments of research around so that they could see the world as children see it” (Egg et al., 2004, p. 10), with suggestibility and preconceived ideas from the adult researcher

absent or minimized (see also Boyden, 2003). Like role play and puppetry, this approach reaches beyond the confines of language and pre-existing stereotypes, expanding the window of opportunity and potential to unveil children's realities and corresponding imaginative solutions.

Aligned with the UN Study's objective to understand the prevailing situation of abuse and violence, its associated forms, scale and contexts, and the realization that there is a lack of sufficient data involving children in data collection, UNICEF also devised a participative assessment tool: (a) to capture a snapshot of violence against children, (b) to ground the research ethically, reflective of its sensitivity, and (c) to be simple enough to be used by institutions working with children (UNICEF, 2005b). The development of the participatory assessment tool (PAT) was a multi-country effort, wherein each country team designed participatory instruments, applied them and produced their findings to share with the larger group.

### ***Revisiting consent, validity and reliability***

The UN Study's emphasis on the need for children's perspectives to understand and address violence also led researchers to discuss issues around consent, validity and reliability, and in several cases explore alternative approaches more cognizant of children's agency.

For instance when devising a study to elicit children's views of child abuse in Uganda, researchers were apprehensive as to whether questionnaires would be appropriate to elicit children's views. Accordingly, the team involved child advisers, who expressed their support in the light of the Ugandan context and the structured format of the questionnaire. ISPCAN also established a child advisory panel to ensure its survey on violence against children was language appropriate. Analysing research methods to examine the prevalence of corporal punishment of children, Durrant identifies a lack of systematic scientific research on children's reports about corporal punishment, with the vast majority of current literature on corporal punishment dealing with adults and reflecting the adult perspective. She considers that "while studies of small samples or focus groups might not yield adequate data for prevalence estimates, they can provide an excellent starting point for developing measures that can capture children's experience in a valid way within a particular culture" (2005, p. 21).

To address the issue of consent, a 'passive consent' was suggested and is gaining credence. Passive consent in the school, for instance, involves sending a letter home to every parent and requesting a response only in the event the parent does not want his or her child to participate (Carroll-Lind et al., 2006). Seemingly this appears to be an ethically appropriate method of seeking consent. An alternative is to seek consent from children directly, yet in the development of a child self-assessment questionnaire examining maltreatment ISPCAN suggested that the capacity of children to give consent remains problematic, since it may be difficult for the child to assess the implications of the research being conducted. Moreover, disclosure of information about child abuse could potentially result in the child's removal from his or her home and criminal prosecution of the parents. Aware of this dilemma, however, ISPCAN also recognizes that "children are an incomparable source of data about

abuse in the home, institutional or school settings” (ISPCAN, 2007). Their views and perspectives must be captured.

Conventionally, the credibility of child reports has been identified as a confounding factor in child participation. Several documents submitted to the UN Study indicate that a child’s verbalization of sensitive topics like violence cannot always be accepted at face value, particularly because children are fearful of sharing painful stories that often involve adults, and even loved ones (Browne, n.d). While these hold some validity, further research submitted to the UN Study also highlighted the reliability of data given favourable conditions. For example, research on an educational prevention programme in Canada (see Fairholm et al., 2005) suggests greater attention needs to be paid to the conditions of disclosure, and the power afforded to children in the disclosure processes. Specifically through an analysis of services (via evaluation forms and focus group discussions), young people highlighted six optimal conditions for disclosure: (a) someone asking directly about the experiences of abuse; (b) young people possessing both the definitions of abuse and the language to describe their experiences; (c) access to someone who believes the child and is willing to listen; (d) a sense of control over the disclosure process, in particular their anonymity; (e) knowledge and resources to aid themselves and others; and (f) effective responses of adults. This adds credence to the notion that children are intentional; continuously taking stock of their environment to decide if their safety will be assured when sharing experiences.

In several ways, it may not be the method itself that enables the expression of child agency, but rather the ways in which children are involved and their perspectives shared. For example, a questionnaire can be participatory if children are involved in its design, and furthermore if it serves as the basis for their own research. In the same way, drawings or role play can discourage children if they are not informed of the context and reasoning for the methodology being used, if they are not given the opportunity to explain their drawings, or if they cannot be confident that the sharing of information will not be embarrassing or put them in further danger.

In sum, the methodologies incorporated around the UN Study have helped in the questioning of some conventional child participation methodologies which had little regard for children’s competency, and have further stretched both thinking and practice.

### ***Role of research in supporting agency***

The discussion above suggests that research can play a critical role in strengthening the link between individual, proxy and collective agency through child empowerment and adult education; bringing attention to the opportunities and capabilities for children’s involvement.

Parkes (2007a), who also submitted a public submission to the UN Study, found that ethnographic study, semi-structured interviews, art, role play and games, via observation and participation, served to foster new solutions or expand available options to keep young people safe. Observing young people’s own experiences of listening to each other and discussing issues, Parkes concluded that the young people were more apt to devise ‘non-violent’ solutions to abating violence, including verbal persuasion, negotiation and joint problem-

solving. Through negotiation and discussion the children's collective capacity for agency was nurtured, and served also to build individual capacity to facilitate change. It is at the point of indecision where children struggle to position themselves in relation to violence that intervention programmes can make a difference "through working with young people to sever the connections between violence and control, and to seek non-violent sources of empowerment" (2007a, p. 410). Thus the relevance of research methods to programming is far-reaching.

However, the influence of research will vary depending on the attention paid to the longer term. Single and short-term studies based on children's perspectives alone are not sufficient, and consideration also needs to be given to the implementation of children's views. Several studies reporting on children's perspectives have chosen, for instance, to provide a list of children's testimonies – yet, while informative on the functioning of agency, is this sufficient? How can child agency be realized and projected in other ways, since embracing child agency in child protection programming requires giving attention to follow-up and translating children's sharing into action.

Indeed, supporting children's agency through research involves entering into uncharted territories and necessitates a paradigm shift to adopt new ways of working with children. It also means addressing systemic factors that cause violence. Research methods, as in programming, need to create opportunities for partnerships between children and adults that embrace children's agency, and to devise empowering approaches reflective of the diversity in experiences and positions of both adults and children in society.

## 5. PERSPECTIVES ON VIOLENCE

Aside from examining methods of involving children, how do children view violence against children? From their viewpoint, what causes or perpetuates violence? How can it be abated? Moreover, how are young people's perspectives informed by child agency? In the light of the nature of the consultations and the information available, this section combines the analysis of the consultations with other contributions submitted to the UN Study, and speaks to how children are constantly practising agency by responding to and giving meaning to violence.

Reflecting on the prevalence of violence in their lives, children, globally, revealed its multifaceted nature, involving physical violence, emotional/psychological violence, sexual abuse (including harassment), and neglect (Ma, 2004; Naker, 2005; Save the Children Norway, 2005). Accordingly, *Global Report 2007: Ending legalised violence against children* states: "Children testify to the hurt – not only physical, but the 'hurt inside' – which the violence causes them, compounded by adult acceptance, even approval of it" (Global Initiative, 2007, p. 5). Children also highlighted that acts of violence against children often result from adults' abuse of power, a lack of respect for children and a devaluing of children's perspectives.

While the UN Study framed violence against children in particular settings, children's stories reflect fluidity across settings. For instance, children repeatedly spoke about the connections between home, school and community, reiterating that these are paramount in understanding the perpetuation of violence (Europe and Central Asia statement, UN Study, 2005e). One young girl in the European and Central Asian consultations indicated: "If they [kids] are beaten at home, they are going to beat, that is, if their parents ill-treat them or don't talk to them, kids will beat others because they are beaten. They are going to drag with them what they see at home. This is the basis of violence."

This statement serves as a stark reminder; a child's life is not neatly compartmentalized or bound. A child's life is fluid and events in one setting, for example, home, often transfer to other settings in a child's life. Children as agents respond to their environment, an environment that is constantly fluid and changing. Accordingly, a child who experiences violence in one setting brings this experience to another, and children often experience various forms of violence. Programmatic interventions, however, often target a particular setting or a specific form of violence – a notion needing further exploration.

Recognizing the interconnected nature of the lives of children, and thus violence against children, the following highlights the causes of violence from a child's perspective, focusing on four of the five settings addressed in the UN Study (note: violence against children in the context of care and institutions is not addressed given a lack of relevant information). This is followed by an examination of children's coping strategies, and finally, a discussion of children's solutions and responses to violence against children in relation to child agency.

### *At home*

A prime finding of the UN Study indicates violence against children most often occurs in the home – contrary to the assumption that home is the safest place. Discussions with children suggest violence in the home results from inappropriate parenting behaviour, the absence of role modelling, adult hypocrisy, and lack of caring (Naker, 2005; North America consultations, UN Study, 2005g), that it takes on many forms (physical, emotional, etc.), and that it is experienced in multiple ways. For instance, children experience emotional abuse at home while also witnessing domestic violence (i.e. parents fighting with each other), being yelled at (or called names), neglect (i.e. “parents leave children home [alone] at night to go out gambling”(North America); “use money to buy drugs” (North America); “My stepmother never talks to me or teaches me anything. She ignores me”) and physical punishment.

It is also interesting to note, in the context of home, that children and adults shared different conceptualizations of violence, with adults often reluctant to use the word itself. A study in Uganda serves as a case in point, in which adults justify the use of punishment as a means to guide children’s behaviour rather than seeing it as a form of violence (Naker, 2005). Research on children’s perspectives on physical and emotional punishment in South-East Asia and the Pacific also speaks to this contradiction between children’s and adults’ perceptions (Baezley et al., 2006). Adults consider direct assaults to be appropriate means to punish children, yet children report the main form of punishment they receive is direct assault. Further, research in Norway suggests that the resistance from adults exists across the system, whether from health workers or the courts (Forum for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

Although the media is often touted as perpetuating violence, children place a considerable responsibility on parents: “adults try to blame the video games and the internet. I think you learn more from the parents; when they spank you they show you violence is okay” (North America consultations, UN Study, 2005g). They emphasize, given their inability to “differentiate between what is fantasy and what is reality,” the responsibility of parents as vigilant supervisors.

Through consultations with young people, it also becomes evident that the dilemmas faced within families today (i.e. ‘broken parenting’) do not solely rest on their parents, but are the result of current pressures existing in the modern world (Ma, 2004). The East Asia and Pacific statement seconded this notion, indicating that the technological and societal changes of the twenty-first century have contributed to increased divorce or marriage break-up (Save the Children Sweden, 2005a, p. 44).

Reflecting on the modes of violence against children in the home, children spoke evocatively about shame and humiliation and the associated negative implications, identifying scolding in front of others as being particularly hurtful. “When I get beaten or verbally abused in front of guests I feel very ashamed ... It is still OK if they [employers] are abusing me when no one is around, but why in front of everyone?” says a nine-year-old domestic worker in India. Or, as identified by a 14-year-old boy in Bangladesh: “Parents always scold the child in front of others. This adversely affects the self-esteem of the child. As a result, the child gets angry and develops a very bad temper” (Bhandari, 2005b, p. 22).

Another area of concern identified by children is the violence experienced while executing chores or tasks in the home and family. Consultations conducted by World Vision in Tanzania to capture children's perspectives, strategies and responses to violence found that domestic labour, including fetching water, cattle herding and working on farms on unreasonable terms, was one of the most identified forms of violence in the home (World Vision International, 2005b). As underscored in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1991), children agree with their responsibilities to play a role in family development, but disagree with the unreasonable terms of domestic chores – often exploitative. This is expressed in the following scenario between father and son that was shared by young people. Father: "Are you still sleeping? Wake up and go work! Before doing that, go chop firewood, but dig first before even that." Son: "I'm not well, Dad." Father: "What's wrong? What are you saying? Woe to you if I find that you haven't done what I have said! Wake up! Go!" It underlines Bourdillon's (2006) analysis that children consider household work to be abusive when demanded unfairly.

Overburdening with domestic chores also pertains to the HIV/AIDS pandemic – a situation that has gained increased attention over the last decade (World Vision International, 2005a). In addition to the heavy burden placed on children to care for the sick, orphaned children are particularly vulnerable to stigmatization and discrimination, directly implicating their social capital (social connections and support system) and possibly resulting in physical and psychological abuse and neglect. Accordingly, children feel pressure to work hard to show their worth and value to guardians, in order to ensure their ongoing care. This is reflected in a song performed by a group of orphans aged between 5 and 10 in Uganda:

The guardians are expecting good things from us.  
They have made us their bank.  
I will try to study hard to impress the guardians  
If God is on my side.

The intentional focus on education is to impress the guardians and illustrative of children's agency; the reference to God indicates, however, that the outcomes of this strategy are uncertain, beyond the children's control.

Children also spoke about sexual abuse in the home at the hands of parents and close relatives, denouncing the inequality between adults and children: "If a girl talks about the sexual abuse at home, she can be thrown out of home ... the man of the house who abuses her goes without any punishment" (Save the Children Sweden, 2005b, p. 57). In response, children can become silent, run away, or themselves become violent, accepting risky lifestyles. To address this gap, children highlight the need to educate parents, teachers and civil society in general.

### *At school*

At school, children suggest that violence results from both teachers and other students. Children identify the multiple forms of violence exercised by teachers, including physical abuse (i.e. corporal punishment), emotional abuse (i.e. discrimination by teachers), sexual

abuse (i.e. molestation of students by teachers), or that resulting from failure to address violence occurring in the class setting (see East Asia and the Pacific consultations, UN Study, 2005c); they repeatedly complained about teachers beating students, and the widespread and routine use of emotional and verbal abuse as discipline (Concerned for Working Children, Karnataka state, India). Compounding the effect of violence in the school is the humiliation of experiencing physical and degrading punishment in front of friends. The implications are devastating, potentially leading to dropping out of school: “It is not the pain that hurt me, but the feeling of humiliation that I underwent when my classmates laughed at me. That was the last day for me at the gate of that school” (Lansdown, 2006, p. 19).

Children’s testimonies also repeatedly speak to an awareness of the unfairness that exists. In the words of a nine-year-old from Orissa: “My teacher teaches me in Oriya, which I don’t understand. When he asks me a question, I can’t answer because I don’t follow what he says. He abuses me and hits me with [a] duster everyday for it” (Bhandari, 2005b, p. 11). According to a 16-year-old boy from Uganda: “the teacher slapped and kicked me, because I was watching my friend solve mathematics problems on the blackboard during lunchtime without the permission. The teacher was drunk” (Naker, 2005, p. 20). Children give meaning to experiences and behaviours, and this is a significant component of exercising agency.

The study materials and the consultations shed light on the prevalence of bullying among peers. Children indicate that bullying results from “a relationship problem” (North America consultation statement). In other words, there are reasons for children bullying. As one report comments: “bullying can be a child’s cry for help and attention.” Interestingly, children also place the responsibility for bullying on the home: “Parents need to be good role models to ensure their child can develop positive relationships rather than some sort of power relationships” (Save the Children Sweden, 2005a, p. 38). A stark reminder that circumstances determine whether children remain victims or become perpetrators of violence.

### *At work*

Perhaps, the expression of child agency has been articulated most strongly in the case of working children. As Bourdillon (2006) points out in a literature review (official submission), the issue of working children brings to the fore the importance of contextualizing childhood, and not imposing a Western ideal of childhood, which is largely free of economic activity and responsibility. O’Connell and Farrow (2007) remind us that discourses about the abuse of working children have largely been based on adult perceptions of a radical division between childhood and adulthood, whereas problems facing working children are singularly similar to those of adults. Working children need to be recognized as subjects: shaping their own lives, and merging into the adult world. Therefore, children must be involved in decisions that affect them.

In the consultations undertaken in the majority world, children emphasized the need to contextualize any condemnation of child labour. In the words of one child:

I don’t agree that the place of children is only in schools. Sorry! The place of a child can be at school and at work. With everything that happens in schools and the bad quality of education, corrupt diplomas, to prepare for life, or one’s family, you must know something.

When someone says our place is not at work we do not like that. ... What's also clear is that girls who work as domestics, if they don't work there, it will be sexual tourism ... finally, if you say that chores done at home is not work, then what is the name of those doing that? ... Saying no to child work that hurts! (West and Central Africa)

In response, the East and Southern Africa consultations request “equality and quality in the work place is what children want” (Save the Children Sweden, 2005a, p. 62). Children’s experiences of violence in the workplace are similar to those of adults, including working long hours for little pay, work that endangers their health and morals, and physical and psychological abuse; they also mentioned sexual abuse and harassment in the workplace. In addition, children emphasize job insecurity, and the deprivation of freedom.

Beyond identifying the role of child-led organizations as a mechanism to protect children, there were no apparent studies that shed light on how these operated in practice.

### *In the community*

In the consultation statements, children emphasize their place in community, and the need for the entire community to put an end to violence (see North America, and Europe and Central Asia). As identified in the opening statement of Caribbean children: we are “by-products of our society,” needing proper encouragement and nourishment to blossom. Children call upon society to “do better,” given a sense that “every day we are exploited and used as proxies for the deviance of and perversion of adults.” Overall, young people expressed their dissatisfaction with communities’ inclusion of children’s perspectives: “the way our society is set up ... kids aren't allowed to think for themselves about how they think things should be done ... You are treated as second-rate citizens” (Ma, 2004, p. 4).

A shortcoming of some consultations was that little attention was paid to how existing assets within community and culture can be drawn upon. As reported in a meeting about indigenous children and violence, for official submission:

The existence of problems of violence does not suggest the absence of community strengths. Indeed, the identification of strengths holds potential for leveraging them to redress problems identified by the community ... The question now is how to restore or replace them as we evolve through different and rapidly changing times. The process of doing that should focus on ‘reconciliation’, rather than on ‘healing’, which implies recovery from pain and disease or trauma. Pain should not be our identity – who we are, even if it is a reality or our situation. (IICRD, 2004)

There are exceptions, and an official submission of research undertaken in Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands examined positive ways for communities to support children by drawing on the resilience of children and identified new ways to build upon the positive child–family and child–community interactions in existence (Dorning, Gow and Kaucz, 2005). The research highlights the changing nature of childhood in societies undergoing major transition, including to urbanization and modernity, with children speaking about a childhood traditionally encompassing play, school, hunting, and helping in the family. The study points to the risks for violence and abuse represented by the customary view of children as responsible and contributing members of the family. Examples of ‘kastom’ – or

traditional culture – identified by children that increase vulnerability to violence include land disputes, bride price and adoption.

Children say they have traditionally lacked the space to participate in community decision-making processes, and advocate for their involvement in these processes. Given the increasing pressures brought to bear on the young through modernization, the inclusion of children in developing new ideas around rights and participation is fundamental because “continuing to deny children and youth a voice will only widen the growing gap between generations” (Dorning, Gow and Kaucz, 2005, p. 33). The study concludes with the recommendation to find creative ways to resolve the growing clash between modernization and ‘kastom’, and to create forums for the voices of children and youth to be heard at the levels of the family and broader community. Points raised by children throughout the minority world are that there is a need for respect and for the creation of child/youth friendly communities.

Along with a recognition of children’s perspectives on violence in the community, attention must also be paid to children’s involvement in organized violence on the street, and how children can contribute to a lack of safety. Violence can be attractive to children when it places them in positions of greater agency (Parkes, 2007a, 2007b), and while children often resist violence and are more likely to ‘talk it out’, at other times it becomes a form of capital for children, providing power and control..

### *Coping strategies*

Illustrative of children’s agency are the coping strategies used by children to mitigate the effects of violence. Research indicates that children respond by either intervening in the violent situation or distancing themselves from the experience (see Solberg reference in Forum for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Often young people opt not to talk about the abuse or violence they have experienced (Fairholm et al., 2005; Kabir, 2005; Naker, 2005), and the reasons identified are threefold: limiting the unpleasant feeling violence represents; reducing the likelihood that they will be perceived as different from others; and minimizing the risk of repeated violence. Children spoke about the fear that if they told the family they would be punished and held accountable for the act (Kansakar, 2005). In other cases, children stay silent because they believe talking about sex is taboo, or they feel that mentioning abuse would result in “shame for oneself and the family” and “intimidation or threat by an abuser” (Kansakar, 2005, p. 21). This is especially so in the case of sexual abuse (see Save the Children in Uganda, 2005). Thus children’s reasoning is determined by their circumstances.

According to a Bangladeshi study on children’s perspectives on abuse (Kabir, 2005), coping strategies described by children can be grouped into four categories. Children (1) take no action; (2) keep themselves busy and avoid the place where the behaviour took place; (3) seek comfort from others; and/or (4) employ various negative strategies such as non-cooperation, protest or retaliation.

Running away from the situation is another prevalent strategy, and may occur in situations where the child can no longer cope or needs attention. In the context of violence, circumstances may include leaving abusive parents/guardians who neglect them or force them to work in exploitative situations, or schoolteachers who are violent and disrespectful. Children also run away because they consider it their best alternative: “I live on the streets, my mother is dead, my dad is an alcoholic, beats me every time he is drunk. So I feel safer here. I sometimes go with men for ‘bad things’” (Bhandari, 2005a, p. 21).

Children have reasons to take the decisions they do: “I was only twelve when I ran away from home. My family was very poor. My father did not have a job but he used to drink every night, sometimes even in the day. Then he used to beat me, my mother and sisters” (Bhandari, 2005a, p. 21). Children’s awareness of adults’ expectations and responses also define their behaviour: “We heard that in court we have to say that we are guilty in the presence of the Magistrate. If we don’t do so the police will torture us and we will be sent back into custody” (Bhandari, 2005a, p. 52). While circumstances sometimes suggest that children are unaware of unfairness or are approving, research indicates that a fear of adults reverberates in children, forcing them to respond in a particular way.

Agency also explains why children’s experiences with violence can lead to victims of violence becoming perpetrators. As stated in the South Asia consultations: “When children suffer violence they sometimes learn to fight violence with violence.” In consultations in Canada, young people described the vicious circle of violence as follows:

It seems like the very system that is meant to protect and support us functions more like a maze of barriers and hurdles. This only inhibits us and leads us to be aggressive and violent, much like simmering violence before it boils over from the pot. This breeds frustration and hopelessness, and perpetuates a sense of devaluation amongst us that can lead to violent behaviours. (Ma, 2004, p. 4)

The feeling of exclusion felt by young people creates an environment of mistrust, anxiety and anger that can result in young people gravitating towards gangs to respond to the human need for acceptance and support. “The groups provide a source of companionship or ‘extended family’ and also protect them from violence on the streets” (Lansdown, 2006, p. 23). Thus child agency can singularly contribute to violence, a finding underemphasized in the Report compared to children’s views and recommendations (see Save the Children, 2006a). The challenge in intervention programmes is to change the context, and this places considerable significance on the rights-based approach.

### ***Agency and socialization***

The findings above are a stark reminder that children are socialized to accept certain kinds of behaviour that may violate human rights. Children’s perspectives are shaped by their sociocultural context, and it is in this context that several studies submitted to the UN Study paid particular attention to the differential treatment of girls and boys (Bhandari, 2005a, 2005b; Karlsson and Karkara, 2003). According to the theory of socialization and gender put forward by Save the Children, society’s norms, values and beliefs shaping us are generally patriarchal, placing children in “a powerless ‘position’ vis-à-vis adults, and as a result are

excluding and discriminating against girls” (Bhandari, 2005a, p. 7). Accordingly, girls and boys learn from culture and reiterate practices that can involve unequal treatment.

A study on children’s perspectives on abuse in Bangladesh demonstrates, however, that children’s judgements of the acceptability of certain disliked behaviour varies according to socio-economic status, and whether the child lives in a rural or urban area (Kabir, 2005). While there was almost unanimity on the unacceptability of certain kinds of behaviour – consenting/sexual behaviour, unfair/unjust behaviour, exploitation and causing physical hurt/harm – rural and poor children were found to justify discipline and punishment behaviour more than urban children; for rural children, particularly girls, this was dependent on the child’s relationship with, or the status of, the person responsible for the behaviour.

In search of child-rearing methods promoting peace rather than violence, Ennew and Plateau (2005) submitted a report to the UN Study examining groups in society who promote peace, and do not use violence to discipline. Their analysis identifies child-rearing practices that avoid violence, which include, for instance, community encouragement and support of parental responsibility; close physical contact with and supervision of infants; comparative lack of supervision of children after infancy; and the absence of models of aggressive behaviour among adults or between adults and children. Most importantly the authors reiterate the critical mutuality between respect, responsibility and reasoning.

According to Ennew and Plateau, peaceful people reinforce ‘individuals’ locus of control’ – a term that resonates with internal child agency – whereby people are given responsibility for the consequences of their own actions. Examining hierarchical societies that aim to achieve social and physical harmony throughout the process of child-rearing, the authors found that children were taught the rules of respect and politeness early on, beginning with physical adaptation to others. Significant in their findings are the notions that child-rearing practices influence how children practise agency, and that child agency can be shaped to instill non-violent values and practices. Thus the authors call for the promotion of a peaceful culture based on non-violence, rather than merely opposing violence.

Karp identifies the CRC’s potential in supporting these views by drawing attention to the CRC as the only convention explicitly introducing domestic violence into the public realm of international law, and, given the holistic interpretation of the CRC put forward by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, affirms the unequivocal view that “disciplinary or educative corporal punishment, however light, should be regarded as violence per se, and should therefore be prohibited” (n.d., p. 15). Thereby, the Committee negates an interpretation of the articles in a context of culture or traditional values. At the forefront, she places the child’s rights to human dignity, pointing out that the “Convention entails new insights on social and legal presumptions and presuppositions, concerning violence against children ... the evolving capacities of children and the role of children themselves as partners in society” (n.d., p. 23). In other words, the implementation of child rights requires involving children in devising a new ‘culture of thinking’.

## *Responses and solutions*

Children’s responses and solutions to violence against children speak in several ways to the role and nature of the internal and external dimensions of child agency. Children state loud and clear that they have a role to play in addressing violence against children, and they recognize that violence is caused by a myriad of societal factors requiring work in partnership with adults, and with other children.

Children indicate that the responsibility for effecting change lies with adults as duty-bearers and children as rights-holders. We are “partners in change” write the South Asian children, recognizing children’s responsibilities “so that they do not abuse other children” (Save the Children Sweden, 2005a, p. 27). As identified in the statement from Europe and Central Asia: “You rely on our expertise like we rely on your power and commitment. We have solutions and you have the power to implement them. Through dialogues and cooperation we must act together and act now!” A UNICEF poll (see box 5.1) published on the Voices of Youth website indicates that while children are most likely to see the greatest responsibility as resting with the family (21.5 per cent), children consider responsibility lies with all the systems of accountability (61.8 per cent).

### **Box 5.1: Children’s poll on violence**

Who do you think is responsible for keeping a child safe?

- Family (21.5%)
- Community (3.8%)
- Schools (2.3%)
- Government (4.9%)
- Religious institutions (2.0%)
- All of the above (61.8%)
- None of the above (3.5%)

Total votes: 2131

*Source:* Voices of Youth, UNICEF.

Central to children’s perspectives on the cause of violence is a recognition that violence comes from children being powerless, not feeling valued, and a lack of good relationships with children. As summarized by the children in the seminar on Building a Europe for and with Children, “Participation makes children and young people feel valued and gives them a sense of belonging in each of the settings” (Council of Europe, 2006, p. 9). Preventing violence involves nurturing “good relationships,” a need that children recognize more than adults (Dorning, 2002). As expressed in a submission from Ukraine: “Children suffer from lack of love and attention; they need to be confident of what is going to happen tomorrow, that they will never be left out.”

### ***Proxy agency***

In order for proxy agency to be an effective mechanism to protect children against violence, children emphasize the need for the development of human capacity in all settings where children live, and across all levels – in government offices, the UN and NGOs, institutions, schools and families. It is about shifting the role taken on by adults from one of experts to one of facilitators and supporters who have the skills to engage children in the planning, implementation and problem-solving activities of daily living, as well as in broader policy processes. It is about building the capacity of adults to “speak on behalf of children and young people” (Save the Children Sweden, 2005a, p. 15).

Regaining the trust of children will require adopting new ways of fostering partnerships and this begins by listening to children (Save the Children Sweden, 2005a; Lansdown, 2006). In reference to parents, for instance, it is for them to “accept their children for who they are – children – and to understand and listen to their problems” (Save the Children Sweden, 2005a, p. 19). It requires enhanced awareness and capacity building.

### ***Collective agency of children***

In its recommendations, the Report advocates support to children’s organizations and child-led initiatives. Children also reiterate the importance and effectiveness of child interventions: “other youth give them a sense of normality and acceptance, making it easier to help the child” (North America consultation); “we can communicate with children more easily. We can help to reflect the view of the victims” (East Asia and the Pacific); or else “we, children and young people find strategies. We encourage other children to end violence against children as well” (session in preparation for the UN Study’s launch in New York). In sum, “As youth leaders it is our responsibility to change the status quo, transforming the role of youth from that of victims to stewards of our peers, our brothers and our sisters” (final statement Caribbean).

Several materials submitted to the UN Study highlighted the experiences of child-led organizations. Included in the multitude of benefits are an increased self-confidence and ability to speak and stand up against harassment and discrimination in a range of settings, including domestic labour (Kansakar, 2005). Focus groups with girls and boys in a child-led organization like Child Brigade further attributed working together as a means of helping each other through the sharing of knowledge and information; organizing in groups to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation; and creating other children’s groups based on experience and lessons learned. A 13-year-old girl from Nepal explains: “I used to think that being a girl I don’t have the right to protest when boys and men misbehave with me. But after joining the child club, I came to know that I have all the right to feel safe all the time. I can protect and protest whenever someone tries to harass or abuse me.”

**Table 5.1: Children's approaches to end violence against children**

Activities	Methods	Impacts
Advocacy	Meetings to highlight sexual abuse (Nicaragua).	Encourage coordination and engagement.
	Collaboration with police and local authorities to end violence against children (West Africa).	Post regional consultation the young people's activities resulted in child-adult partnerships and an understanding and appreciation of child contributions.
	Report molestation and violations to authorities (Zambia and Nicaragua).	Child-directed initiative resulted in teacher being dismissed and arrested.
	Dialogues with politicians (India).	Created a platform for child-duty bearer interactions. Minister issued a government order banning corporal punishment in schools.
	Interviewed politicians on violence against children.	Young people were seen, heard and recognized as important actors.
Research	Diagnostic surveys to capture incidence of sexual abuse (Nicaragua) and child marriage (Bangladesh), and views from children on domestic violence (Hong Kong).	Fostered collaboration and adult-child partnerships at various levels. Raised awareness of sexual abuse within the community. Child-directed initiative elicited government support to address domestic violence. Community aware of the magnitude of child marriage and instances where children have successfully succeeded in preventing early child marriage.
	Fact-finding mission on a sexual exploitation case (India).	Adult union took up the issue for the children and the teacher was suspended from school.
Awareness-raising	Preparation and distribution of communication and sensitization materials (Nicaragua, West Africa, Bangladesh, India) including radio and TV, newspapers, the internet, drama, workshops, etc.).	Fostered collaboration and adult-child partnerships at various levels. Raised awareness of sexual abuse, child marriage and violence against children within the community. Appreciation of child contributions.
	Film production (India) on Physical and Degrading/Humiliating Punishment in Schools and Institutions (India) and Stop Violence against Children.	Created a platform for child-duty bearer interactions. August 2004, minister issued a government order banning corporal punishment in schools; young people were seen, heard and recognized as important actors.
Education	Workshops on prevention of sexual abuse (Nicaragua) and violence against children (Romania).	Fostered collaboration and adult-child partnerships at various levels. Raised awareness within the community.
	Sensitization of parents and children (West Africa and Peru).	Promotion of alternatives to corporal and psychological punishment. Enable children to participate and express themselves.
	Organized conference on violence against children (Palestine).	Girls organized the conference and framed the questions for discussion.
	National sensitization workshop for police to educate on violence against children in juvenile justice system (Yemen).	Police stations free from violence. Children no longer detained at police stations but sent to rehabilitation centres.
	Community meetings and dialogues (Nepal).	Children increasingly recognized as people with worthwhile opinions and suggestions.
	Use of coffee ceremonies to educate on HIV/AIDS (Ethiopia).	Use of culture as a sensitization mechanism.

Source: Adapted from Karkara and Jabeen, 2005.

Although child-led and guided initiatives are deemed important, the meaning of ‘child-led’ remains unclear. As identified in Save the Children’s own analysis of its response to violence against children in South Asia region, the novelty of the interventions means that “there is no clear framework of indicators with which to systematically assess project impact on violence against children” (Jabeen and Karkara, 2005, p. 4). An examination of the 15 ‘child-led advocacy’ programmes reviewed in *Children’s Actions to End Violence against Girls and Boys* (Karkara and Jabeen, 2005) suggests that children’s actions fall into four categories: advocacy, research, awareness-raising and education, with a range of methods and multisectorial impacts (see table 5.1). Further research is necessary to understand how agency is fostered, and its unfolding at the internal and external levels.

Of particular interest is the impact children’s organizations have had on changing discriminatory cultural practices. Particular initiatives by Concerned for Working Children in India, the Child Clubs in Nepal and the Child Brigade report success stories where children’s campaigns that sought to raise awareness resulted in positive outcomes for children in circumstances of early marriage, the barring of girls from schools and vocational training centres, harassment, and dowry considerations (Masud Ali, 2005; Kansakar, 2005). To draw parallels and comparisons warrants further research.

## **6. MOVING FORWARD**

This paper arose from a concern to understand and recognize how children contribute to their own development, their protection and society. Thus far it has discussed elements of child agency in relation to child development and protection, and also examined the participation of children in the UN Study on Violence against Children. Prior to making recommendations, summary points from the paper are presented below.

### **The value of agency**

Examining the agency literature highlights how agency is intrinsic to human development, and operates at the internal and external levels. While people play an active role in shaping their environment, the capacities and opportunities afforded to individuals are influential factors. In the context of children, the focus on agency has brought to the fore the notion that children are social actors, constantly responding to and interacting with their environment, both in their own development and that of their societies. Recognition of child agency requires a complete overhaul of intervention programmes that consider children as helpless and powerless.

In the context of violence, child agency draws attention to the interlinkages between the public and private arenas that underpin the causes of violence, and identifies that agency can serve both as a protective and a contributing factor to violence and risky behaviour, whereby the need for belonging and acceptance, or normative socialization practices, can lead children to be perpetrators of violence.

Indeed, further research is warranted to understand how child agency functions at the internal and external levels, and can be nurtured. Current research suggests nonetheless that seeking opportunities to afford child agency at the level of the individual, by proxy or collectively involves creating an enabling environment for children, building on local assets. Often working in new ways with adults to transform the normative, sociocultural, political and economic contexts within which people operate is part of the equation.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a normative framework to undertake the task, given the recognition of both participation and protection rights. Interpretation and implementation of the CRC cannot take place single-handedly, however, and requires the involvement of children and their communities.

### **Children's agency in the UN Study?**

Close examination shows that, while child participation was considered vital to the UN Study, and children's recommendations are reflected in the overall recommendations of the UN study, there were fewer opportunities for children to influence and shape its agenda, particularly the content of the *World Report*. Indeed, one needs to be cognizant of context: the mandate and audience of the report. An analysis of the UN Study reiterates that participation is not always interchangeable with agency, and that it is necessary to encompass the internal

and external elements that inform the context of participation and place emphasis on the role of culture and community assets to find suitable solutions to address violence against children.

Despite this limitation, the UN Study material and associated initiatives do speak to how the processes and opportunities afforded to children determine children's ability to exercise agency. Specifically, a review of the regional consultations highlights the important role of (1) child friendly information and protection; (2) representation; (3) child involvement in each stage; and (4) the need to make an impact on decision makers to effect change. The UN Study's public submissions further highlight attempts to enable children to contribute, particularly emphasizing methodologies and innovative approaches. As a result, new partnerships among researchers, children and programmatic stakeholders are being forged, a broader range of participatory methods are being employed, and an openness exists to challenge concerns that prevent the participation of children in both quantitative and qualitative realms.

Materials submitted to the UN Study also highlight that children's lives are not neatly bounded, so that children's perspectives on the causes of and solutions to violence against children indicate that children practise agency across the settings of significance in their lives, and employ a multitude of strategies to cope with and address violence both internally and externally. Moreover child-led organizations appear to be effective in protecting children from and responding to violence, although this warrants further research. These nuances however were not reflected in the *World Report*.

Although a complex term, agency pushes the agenda to recognize more widely the potential and lived realities of children. The multifaceted nature of child protection further muddies the water, specifically challenging traditional adult-child power relations, and necessitating new approaches to work with children.

## **Recommendations**

To move forward involves following up and implementing the recommendations of the UN Study and the *World Report on Violence against Children*, and those made by children throughout the regional and national consultations. In addition, the following should be given consideration:

- **Widespread acceptance that all children (young and older) are competent human beings** who, reflecting their evolving capacities, must be involved in the design and implementation of child protection initiatives and strategies. The UN Study provided an opportunity to involve older children, yet there is a need to involve younger children in the design and implementation of research and strategies to afford protection, through age and culturally appropriate methods. In addition, the views of all children need to be captured to reflect **the everyday lives of children where settings are not neatly bounded**.

- **Implementation of child protection practices that involve rights-holders and duty-bearers across the ecology model and foster cross-cutting interactivity, flexibility and learning.** Although a prime finding of the UN Study is that most violence occurs in the home, children are also aware of the broader systemic reasons (economic, social and cultural) contributing to violence. Transforming child–adult power relations and addressing broader systemic issues having an impact on community members require supporting synergies from the ‘bottom up, to top down’, to foster flexibility and learning across the systems and structures that shape the dynamic ever-changing world, and reduce violence.
- **Greater knowledge and use of the multidimensional interlinkages between individual, proxy and collective agency in relation to protecting children from violence across settings.** Currently, contributions to understanding child agency are most significant in research examining coping strategies; research with working children has also paid attention to collective agency. Research in other areas is required to further understand how child agency is operationalized, how it operates at each level (individual, collective and proxy), how different forms of agency interact, and how interlinkages of agency can be nurtured for child protection. More specifically, the place and role of children’s organizations/child-led organizations to strengthen child agency and provide protection deserve further inquiry.
- **Viewing culture as an asset and a protective factor in the expression of child and community agency.** In the critique of traditional practices and customs, culture is often identified negatively throughout the UN Study materials. Recognizing that culture is ever changing and that children are creators of that change, it is suggested that sustainable intervention programmes will come from building on aspects of culture that are protective of children – while at the same time challenging cultural attitudes and practices that promote a culture of violence.
- **Promoting child friendly structures** (including child friendly information) and the active involvement of children and young people in the implementation of the UN Study recommendations, at international, national and local levels.
- **Ensuring that the lessons from this process are incorporated** into the planning of future similar processes (i.e. to ensure that children and young people are involved in the design and the agenda setting of future processes).
- **Promoting interdisciplinary and applied approaches** to research in the area of child participation/children’s agency and child protection (i.e. in the area of children’s perceptions of child protection responses, in child-led research, in research on children’s actions/agency to address child protection issues, etc.).

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