



Praxis Note No. 65

Turning voice into action

A discussion of three Action Research studies conducted by the Danish Children and Youth Network and their learning outcomes

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Introduction

Including beneficiary voices in the design of development programmes is crucial to ensuring their success. While most development practitioners recognise this, we often struggle to do it in a meaningful way. At the Danish Children and Youth NGO Network (C&Y Network), we have begun using Action Research as a means of including the voices of children and young people in our programme design. This note reviews experiences from three Action Research studies conducted by the C&Y Network and discusses some important learning outcomes.

We learned a great deal from each Action Research process. This includes learning on how to involve children in research; making compromises to support the inclusion of local voices; and how to ensure sustainable action based on the research. We hope that this will provide useful lessons for others embarking on similar Action Research projects.¹

A collaborative approach to research

Over 2011-13, the C&Y Network facilitated three small-scale Action Research studies:

- *Community protection: for, with and by children and youth* (2011)
- *Life skills among marginalised children* (2012)
- *Young Citizens at Crossroads* (2013)

Each study was led by a tripartite collaboration of the C&Y Network, member organisations (a mix of small, medium and large Danish NGOs) and their Southern partners.

The C&Y Network initially designed the studies with input from member organisations and their partners where possible and appropriate.² Partner

¹ For an overview of Action Research see Popplewell, R., and R. Hayman. 2012. "Where, how and why are Action Research approaches used by international non-governmental organisations?" Oxford: INTRAC.

² On the methodology (in Danish) see Skovgaard Mortensen, D. 2012. "Brug af evidensbaserede metoder – erfaringsopsamling og inspiration for faglige netværk og deres medlemsorganisationer" www.ngoforum.dk

organisations selected the study sites and target groups. Members and their partners carried out the fieldwork and data collection with the support of the C&Y Network.

A Danish consultant supported each process. They developed guidelines for the research, and helped the network to analyse and compare findings across the different countries and projects. They also helped to produce a report with recommendations on how to take the work forward.

The C&Y Network

The Danish Children and Youth Network (C&Y Network) was formed in 2001. It consists of 50 Danish NGOs working with children and youth projects, and programmes in developing countries. The C&Y Network facilitates capacity development and advocacy activities among member organisations, including:

- Capacity development through training courses, studies and workshops
- Exchange and documentation of experiences and lessons learnt with members
- Development of strategies and methods, including advocacy, aimed at improving children's and young people's position in society

The C&Y Network is one of several NGO networks in Denmark financed by Danida, via the NGO Forum, a body of Danish NGOs involved in development work in the Global South.

Establishing this tripartite collaboration helped to create synergies between different actors. It ensured organisations from each of the different groups were involved in the research's design and implementation. This supported knowledge generation, reflection and learning within all the organisations. Perhaps most importantly, it ensured all parties owned the research results.

The collaboration also allowed the C&Y Network to develop critical new insights on the core research issues, based on knowledge and evidence generated across organisational, geographical and political

boundaries. Moreover, dividing the research between so many organisations meant that each organisation only needed to spend two to three days collecting data. This was crucial to securing the participation of organisations that often function with limited resources and rarely have time to undertake additional tasks and activities.

Why Action Research? The approach and methods

When designing the first study, we did not initially consider using Action Research. We knew from the outset that we wanted Southern partners and the children and young people they work with to have a strong voice in the research and its associated capacity building activities. It was only once we began designing the first study that it became clear Action Research was the most suitable approach. This was largely because the principles of Action Research were very similar to those we wanted the study to embody.

Experience, reflection and action are integral to the process of Action Research, just as they were to our study. Action Research also tends to be more participatory and interactive than conventional research, which can be very extractive. When working with children and young people, the ability to engage with them is central to facilitating genuine and lasting change. We therefore felt that Action Research would help us to support children and young people to make their voices heard, generate new evidence based on these voices, and turn this evidence into concrete action and change.

The three studies each had a very different theme and methodology. This was primarily because each study had a very different starting point.

Study 1: 'Community protection: for, with and by children and youth'³

Existing work within the network on protection inspired this study. It revealed that

³ Skovgaard Mortensen, D. 2012. "Community protection – for, with and by children and youth". www.bu-net.dk/images/Community_Protection_for_with_and_by_Children_and_Youth.pdf

NGOs often know little about how children and young people view protection issues and manage protection risks. The aim of the study was to learn more about children and young people's perceptions of, and approaches to, protection.

Study 2: 'Life skills among marginalised and vulnerable children and youth'⁴

This study was much broader and began with a literature study. It looked at the concepts of life skills and marginalised children in more depth, which meant that it had a much more theoretical starting point. It therefore had a wider and less focused outcome than the first study.

Study 3: 'Young Citizens at Crossroads'⁵

A larger study, *Civil Society at Crossroads*,⁶ which included reflections on how young people are influencing social and political change, inspired this study. In light of Danida's evaluation of its Civil Society Strategy, it seemed an opportune moment to compile new evidence and contribute fresh insights on the alternative approaches to citizenship invented by young people.

On the methodology, the first two studies were fairly conventional. In each study partner organisations, project and programme staff used semi-structured questionnaires and focus groups to collect data from research participants.

The questionnaires consisted of closed and open questions. This allowed us to collect qualitative and quantitative data about each respondent's situation and behaviour patterns. The open questions also created space for participants to provide individual reflections, for example on how they would protect themselves against violence.

⁴ Skovgaard Mortensen, D. 2012. "Literature review on life skills and marginalised children and youth" www.bu-net.dk/images/Literatur_review_-_final_1.pdf and "Life skills among marginalised and vulnerable children and youth". www.bu-net.dk/images/Marginalized_Life_Skills_among_Marginalized_and_Vulnerable_Children_and_Youth_FINAL.pdf

⁵ www.bu-net.dk.

⁶ PRIA, CDRA, PSO, INTRAC, EASUN and ICD. 2012. "Civil society at Crossroads: shifts, challenges, options." New Delhi: PRIA www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=757

Small groups of respondents then shared their views, experience and knowledge on set problems, issues and solutions in focus group interviews. The focus groups also provided opportunities for children and young people to learn from each other, and for local partners to gain new insights.

We also learned more about social and cultural norms and conventions in each country. For example, in the protection study, the focus group participants' confidence in police and community leaders was strikingly high. This was unexpected considering the limited number of cases where these authorities had intervened effectively in situations of serious neglect or violence.

The third study on citizenship had a different methodology. Here, a more creative and participatory approach was used to explore how citizenship is practiced from below. The children and young people who participated in the project became active co-researchers. This enabled them to explore their own perspectives on what citizenship means to children and young people in each context.

The main tools used included visual methods and focus group discussions. We gave participants cameras and encouraged them to take pictures that illustrate the different ways they experience citizenship. Focus groups then discussed these. In each group, the facilitator asked questions around broad aspects of citizenship. These questions covered issues such as recognition as a member of society, justice, solidarity, having a voice in daily life, and alternative and creative spaces for exercising citizenship.

The intention was to let children and young people work in an open space without too many preconceived ideas. We wanted the process to be creative and exploratory. In doing so, we hoped that new and even unexpected perspectives on how citizenship is articulated and practiced would emerge.

Most focus groups use predefined questions. We decided not to do this, as we were concerned that it might prejudice the results of the discussions. It also reduces participants' influence over the group's agenda. This can create an unequal power

relationship between the facilitator and the participants, something we wanted to avoid.

Instead, by structuring the focus groups around the images taken by participants, they were able to control the agenda. The participants chose what pictures to present, and decided what experiences they wanted to share when discussing their pictures.

In each group, we found that the pictures often provoked diverse reactions, with the same images often interpreted in multiple ways. The discussions that ensued stimulated processes of reflection and negotiation among the participants.

"This opens many doors because these photos cannot just be used for the study, but we can also post them on Facebook – not just post nice photos, but also photos of real life, and then begin to protest through these photos, and suggest new solutions and openings."

Young Bolivian participant, *Young Citizens at Crossroads*

These encounters generated new experiences of citizenship among participants, as children and young people made their voices heard. Consequently, the focus groups became much more than a data collection tool. They encouraged the children and young people who participated in them to practice citizenship in their everyday lives and employ alternative avenues to affect social and political change.

What we gained from using Action Research

Using Action Research had a number of benefits. Through playing an active role in the research, partners strengthened their capacity to collect data and generate evidence. They also gained ownership over the process and the results. This increased the likelihood of partners incorporating this new knowledge into future project and programme development.

There was a lot of positive feedback from all parties, particularly in relation to:

The systematic collection of data with limited use of resources

Large amounts of relevant and interesting data were collected in a relatively cost-efficient manner. Partners learned a great deal about collecting data with children and young people. They valued the opportunity and support to develop their research skills and increase their knowledge about the target groups.

Partners particularly appreciated the participatory approach used as it allowed children and young people to discuss the key issues facing them in their own terms. It also supported partners to have conversations on sensitive topics with children and young people, something many lacked the ability and confidence to do before.

The synergy and value added resulting from the common research platform

Members and partners valued the opportunity to learn from other organisations working in different geographical contexts. Comparing issues across programmes and countries generated insights into other ways of working.

The potential for programme development

Many participating members and partners are already using the knowledge generated by these studies to inform future projects and programmes.

“If used, the findings of the study can provide the basis for drafting promising projects aimed at improving the knowledge, capacity and practices of young people in the field of citizenship with a view to making them more responsible and more involved in the community.”

Facilitator in Togo, *Young Citizens at Crossroads*

Key lessons from our experience

The approach we took had its challenges. Consequently, we gained valuable learning from the implementation of these studies.

Balancing quality, participation and resources

An important question for those planning a similar study is how to address the challenge of working with partner staff with limited research experience. We found that the relative inexperience of member and partner organisation staff in doing Action Research with children and young people affected the quality and rigour of the research.

Different teams implemented the research in each country. Few of these teams had any research experience, and we were not able to provide comprehensive training on Action Research for all. The C&Y Network developed research guidelines and gave them to all the research teams. We also developed systems to support individual teams to implement the guidelines.

However, there was still some variation in the data quality. One implication of this was that some partners and young people had a smaller voice in the overall comparative studies. Weak data did not get as much space in the analysis as more robust data. Therefore, the overall studies privileged voices supported by data that were more robust over those supported by weaker data.

Learning from all three studies also shows that the adult facilitators – individuals facilitating focus group discussions and guiding children and young people through the exercises – were key to the outcome of the process. This is partly because they were often the ones reporting on the outcome of the process to the Danish organisation and the C&Y Network. This made them very influential. If they were able to stand back and let the young people speak, they were a great asset to the process.

However, this was not always the case. In the citizenship study, some adult facilitators provided feedback via comprehensive reports rather than simply forwarding the pictures and notes from the focus group

discussions. Facilitators tended to write these in a standardised NGO-language that privileged the facilitator's voice, and drowned out the voices of the children and young people. In particular, they missed many of the nuances in how children and young people experience the limits to citizenship.

We think that this happened because many of the adult facilitators did not have enough experience with the method. This was significant because the method used differs greatly from more structured forms of interviewing that are much easier to use without prior training.

In hindsight, we should perhaps have given greater emphasis to training the partner staff and adult facilitators to reduce some of these issues. However, we had to weigh the cost of training against the level of ambition, time allocation and budget for the study, which in each of these cases were very limited.

Losing nuance in translation

The number of languages used presented another challenge. One study used English, French, Nepali and Hindi. Another included English, Spanish, French and Arabic. In each study process, we developed all materials in English and then translated them into other languages. We translated the non-English answers into English prior to submission of data. Unfortunately, we found that many nuances in views and perspectives were lost during this translation process.

We also had difficulty planning for translation. Good quality translation requires time. However, the selection of countries and partners took place relatively late in the process. This meant that there was less time for translation, affecting quality. Translation is also very expensive, and we lacked the funds to pay for high-quality translation.

Closing the Action Research loop

Action Research is generally presented as a cyclical process, from identifying the issues through research to reflection and action, feeding onwards into new cycles. It was only at the conclusion of the first study that we realised that we had not considered use and follow up sufficiently. Once the second study

was complete, we produced a "Follow-up on Life Skills Study".⁷ Here, the consultant (who had not been involved in the study) suggested we look for inspiration from existing approaches to supporting change or innovation.

The consultant proposed we use an approach called Theory U (see Figure 1).⁸ Many practitioners working on systemic change use this approach because it emphasises co-creation and learning.

It offers inspiration for how to conceptualise and facilitate change as a learning journey depicted by the letter U. At the top of the left leg you stop "downloading patterns of the past". You enter an explorative process where you are open towards new ways of perceiving the problems and tasks. Then you travel downwards through the U towards the bottom where you "let go" of patterns of the past in order to be able to embrace new opportunities. As you travel up the right leg you prototype and test new approaches. Finally, you end up at "performing", where new results, practices and solutions are demonstrated.

We learned to build follow-up into the study process right from the start. This stops the learning journey from ending with the report. Rather the report is an opportunity to identify new approaches, which practitioners could test as prototypes or small projects before scaling them up.

Inspired by this theory, we decided that a Case Clinic workshop should follow the Life Skills study. Here the Danish organisations further investigated their own cases that emerged from the study using different models and methods. The aim was to find out what we could do differently in the future.

Following the success of the Case Clinic workshop, we have decided that a module-based course will follow the Citizenship study. Based on the main observations and findings from the study, the idea is that course participants will work on small change initiatives between modules.

⁷ Dietrich, K. Ohm. 2013. "Follow-up on Life Skills Study". C&Y Network. www.bu-net.dk

⁸ Scharmer, O. (2007) *Theory U: Leading From the Future as It Emerges*. Cambridge, MA: SOL.

Despite these activities, follow-up has proven to be more difficult than anticipated. We think this is because the Action Research studies have generated data and knowledge that fall

outside the established reporting structures of NGOs.

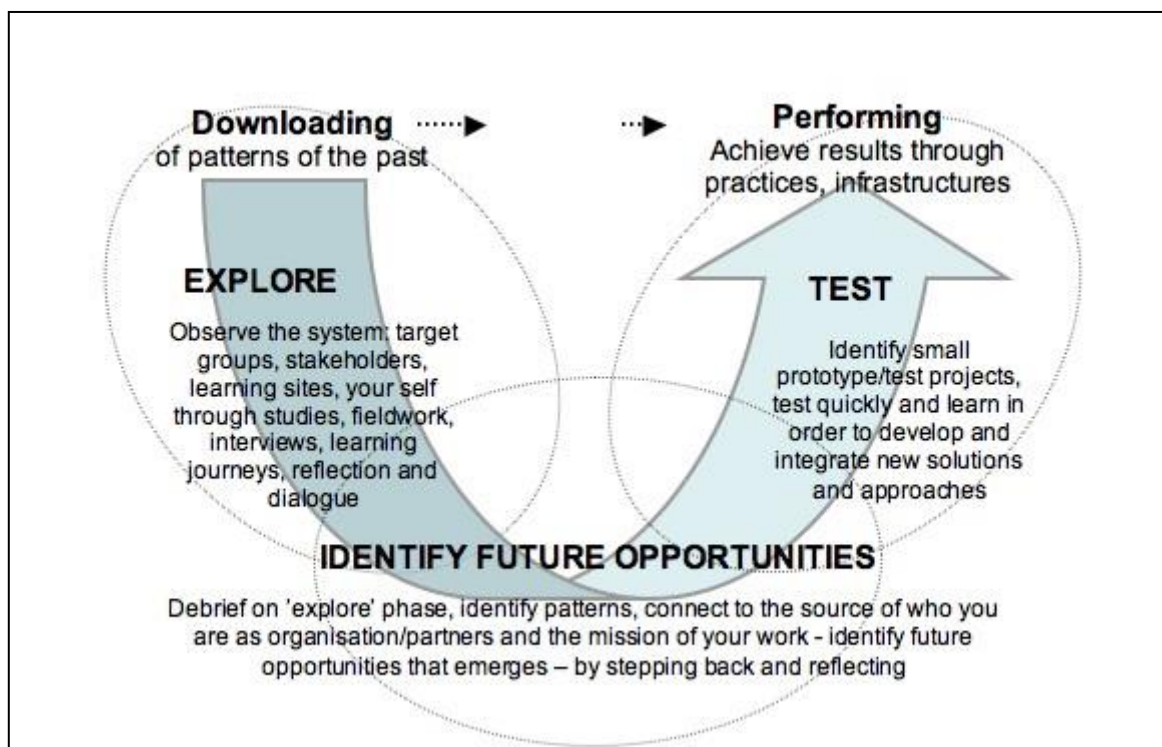


Figure 1: Scharmer, O. (2007). *Theory U: Leading From the Future as It Emerges*. Cambridge, MA: SOL.

These structures support organisations to measure results from projects and programmes against pre-determined indicators and outputs. This means we automatically put information into fixed categories.

In contrast, the Action Research studies have generated knowledge and evidence that is highly context-specific, new and sometimes unexpected. Organisations cannot easily place it into one of these fixed categories: many are not sure what to do with it.

In delivery-focused organisations such knowledge risks being lost as it falls outside established categories of meaning. Attempts to make meaning of the knowledge would require an internal U-process, which involves taking time to step back and reflect.

For example, one recommendation from the Citizenship study is that organisations can no longer rely on existing solutions: “It is not recommended that the Danish

NGOs and their partner organisations limit their interventions to more standardised and formalised citizenship education. This study and learning process has documented that there are far more urgent issues to address”.⁹

This recommendation is something many organisations might struggle to process. It challenges their existing ways of working and established categories of meaning. It requires organisations to step back and reflect on how they approach the issue of citizenship – something many cannot or perhaps even will not do.

Promoting follow-up among the Danish NGOs is one thing; supporting it among the partners involved in each of the studies is another. A key issue for us now is how we support our partners to provide meaningful follow up, particularly with the children and young people who gave their time and energy to the process.

⁹ Mynster Christensen, M. 2013. “Young Citizens at Crossroads”. www.bu-net.dk. p. 34

Conclusion: turning voices into sustained action

Using an Action Research approach in these studies provided an extremely valuable platform for engaging children, young people, and the C&Y Network's partners in the research process. This ensured their voices were central to the studies and their results. Everyone involved learned a great deal, from research skills and better ways of engaging with children, to the value of collaboration and shared ownership of research.

For the C&Y Network in particular, the Action Research studies have strengthened collaboration between member organisations. Through acting as a facilitator, the C&Y Network has served as a platform for facilitating experience sharing and extracting common learning by identifying similarities in dilemmas and by jointly exploring possible solutions.

We also learned how important it is to have appropriate support and facilitation skills, and to accept some of the trade-offs in such participatory research. Crucially, we have to think about follow-up from the outset. Otherwise, Action Research also risks being extractive. Partners and young people can easily end up being involved only as participants in the research, and not fully integrated into the continuous research, learning and action cycle that is central to the theory of Action Research.

These studies have contributed to the development of platforms for children and young people locally and within Denmark. C&Y Network members are gradually incorporating these voices into their day-to-day work. An important issue for the C&Y Network is how to ensure that the knowledge generated *continues* to inform future work. This is important for both the C&Y Network members, and their partners.

Our hope is that by offering follow up in the form of a module-based course we will provide members with an opportunity for stepping back and reflecting. We hope that this will support members and their partners to integrate knowledge and insights into their work further, thereby turning the voices of the children and young people who participated in the studies into real and sustained action.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Marianne Bo Paludan was the chairperson of the C&Y Network (and a staff member of Save the Children Denmark) from January 2001 - September 2013. She is now Assessment Consultant with CISU (www.cisu.dk). Email: mariannebopaludan@gmail.com