

Child and Youth Activism: Claiming spaces in an unequal world

***Full Name of the Panel Organiser: Kay Tisdall**

* Panel organiser is responsible for informing all panellists on the status of their submission

Theme

Child poverty, inequality and child welfare research

Subtheme

- 'rights of children and adolescents'
- 'children's participation and voices'.

Summary of the panel

** We request if we can have a 'double panel' slot of 2 hours. We have the opportunity to involve young people from two of our projects, who are living in Brazil, within the panel. Two hours would give enough time to do justice to their involvement and the proposed papers.**

The proposed panel directly addresses the conference's title -- Children's rights and opportunities in an unequal world. The panel brings together learning from Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, India and Sierra Leone. The panel addresses 'child poverty, inequality and child welfare research', through the subthemes of 'rights of children and adolescents' and 'children's participation and voices'.

The panel brings together 5 papers, for a conceptual and substantive discussion of child and youth activism. The concept is a welcome challenge to children and young people's participation, which has familiar risks of tokenism and quandaries about representation. The panel considers how child and youth activism, embedded in different cultural contexts, can address poverty, inequality and children's welfare.

- (1) Digital activism: Young Leaders connecting across country contexts
- (2) Girls' activism in Sierra Leone: negotiating power, interacting with others and redefining their own lives
- (3) Youth activism in Colombia: transforming communities through youth-led social enterprises
- (4) A tale of two youth expert groups: Learnings from youth activism in research from India and Brazil
- (5) COVIDUnder19: Learnings from child and youth activism globally

The panel will also involve young activists, who have been involved in these projects, from local partners in Brazil (CIESPI and World Vision Brazil). Should online links be available, we can include young activists from the COVIDUnder19 study.

The papers arise from 5 research projects, with mixed methods:

- (1) Virtual ethnography with 50 digital youth activists, focus groups and individual interviews.
- (2) Self-report questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 20 girl activists. Semi-structured interviews with 10 adults.

- (3) Digital and in-person participatory arts- and music-based methodologies with young people, and focus groups and interviews with young people and local stakeholders.
- (4) Qualitative individual interviews developed by youth participants, focus group discussions, manifesto development and photo essays.
- (5) Global survey (over 26,000 responses) designed with children, youth, and adults. Participatory data analysis with COVIDUnder19 youth advisory, art and music based dissemination.

Preliminary findings include:

- Child and youth activism is about claiming a space and making the agenda, rather than waiting to be invited into decision-making.
- Child and youth activism, while individually motivated, is frequently supported by an ‘ecology of activism’ with intergenerational scaffolding and collective mobilisation.
- Child and youth activism can be increasingly successful to address issues of child poverty, inequality and unequal opportunities, as it transforms attitudes.
- Child and youth activism is informed by activists’ personal experiences and intersections between identities and inequalities.
- Youth protagonism highlights intersectional experiences, challenges and barriers associated with access to livelihoods.

Implications include:

- The importance of sustained support for children and young people’s participation spaces, from which they can mobilise for child and youth activism.
- Child and youth activists’ investment in making community change, which can be challenging for adult systems and attitudes.
- More research is required on mitigating digital exclusion and addressing largely adult concerns about child protection.
- The importance of interdisciplinary and intergenerational expertise (e.g. social sciences, human rights, environmental sciences, economics) as research learns with activism that addresses complex challenges.

Paper 1

Digital activism: Young Leaders connecting across country contexts

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	Tamara	Young Leader, World Vision Brazil	
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Thematic importance: This paper is part of the Panel ‘Child and Youth Activism: Claiming Spaces in an equal world’. As with the Panel overall, this paper will directly address the conference’s title -- *Children’s rights and opportunities in an unequal world*. It will bring learning from Young Leaders across Global South contexts (e.g. Bangladesh, Brazil, Ghana). The panel will address the conference theme of ‘child poverty, inequality and child welfare research’, through the subthemes of ‘rights of children and adolescents’ and ‘children’s participation and voices’.

Introduction and objectives:

Child and youth activism has increasingly gone online. It has become critical to bridge geographical divides, travel constraints and – with COVID-19 – physical distancing. While the internet and social media have provided numerous opportunities for inclusion, they have also exacerbated existing or created new digital exclusions.

The study is working with a cross-national group of 600 child and youth activists, called ‘Young Leaders’ and supported by World Vision International. The children and young people are local activists themselves, addressing issues in their communities. They receive training and support to develop their skills to work cross-nationally and internationally.

The study aims to explore the activists’ experiences online, how the affordances of the internet and social media enhances and detracts from their activism on issues important to them, and how to mitigate or improve digital inclusion for them and others.

Two Young Leaders from Brazil will participate in the panel and this paper. Tamara (aged 16) and Carlos (aged 17) are using social media and direct actions to address discrimination-based violence that affect mostly black, young, poor black people.

Method: The project considers Young Leaders as a case study, in a form of child- and youth-led activism supported by a non-governmental organisation. The project began with a focus group discussion to decide on the study’s focus. Fieldwork underway includes: virtual ethnography, of group meetings and activities of the Young Leaders’ online; focus group discussions with Young Leaders; individual interviews with up to 15 Young Leaders, selected on the basis of their experiences of digital inclusion/ exclusion; interviews with key supporting adults.

Results: Preliminary findings include:

- Child and youth activism is about claiming a space and making the agenda, rather than children and young people waiting to be invited into decision-making.

- Child and youth activism, while individually motivated and showing passionate commitment, is frequently supported by an ‘ecology of activism’ with intergenerational scaffolding and collective mobilisation
- Children and young people were initially enthusiastic about being involved online, particularly due to COVID-19 restrictions. However, this has become less welcome and efforts are needed to maintain their enthusiasm.
- Digital exclusion/ inclusion is complex, involving both relational and material aspects. For example, children and young people can find it difficult to find a private place to participate, in their households or elsewhere. This can be particularly important if more sensitive issues are being addressed, such as violence against children and domestic abuse.

Conclusions and implications: The study is underway, so conclusions are being developed.

Paper 2

Girls’ activism in Sierra Leone: negotiating power, interacting with others and redefining their own lives

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Theme: This paper would be part of the Panel ‘Child and Youth Activism: Claiming spaces in an equal world’, which explores children’s rights, challenges and openings for children to address inequalities.

Introduction and objectives: Despite the nearly universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children and young people’s right to participate continues to be limited. Its implementation has been ambiguous, with a sense of being neither strict nor mandatory compared to provision and protection rights. In practice, we can learn from examples where children and young people themselves are resolving how to address their participation, protection and provision rights. One such example are children and young people in Sierra Leone engage in activism to end teenage pregnancy and child marriage.

The study seeks to understand how female child activists’ direct actions prevent teenage pregnancy and child marriage and whether they are able to bring about change. Research questions are:

Q1: What are the social and cultural barriers that reduce the opportunities for children and young people to participate? Q2: What are the connections between child activism and child participation? Q3: What are the specific human rights problems that child

activists work on and how do they become involved in this type of work? Q4: How do identities and inequalities (including gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status) intersect and have an impact on the girls' activism?

Methods: This qualitative research engages 20 female child activists, aged 12 to 17 years, in Sierra Leone, who have advocated for ending teenage pregnancy and child marriage, by conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with them. We also interview 10 significant adult stakeholders, including school teachers, NGO workers, and community leaders, who have engaged in actions to end child marriage and teenage pregnancy. The data collected will be analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: The study is underway, so the results are not ready, but we expect some preliminary findings in May. Some emerging issues from literature and setting context include:

- Girl activism seems to be a new way for girls to stand up and contest patriarchy and traditional values perpetuating child marriage.
- Girl activists are focusing on teen pregnancy and child marriage as two relevant issues that harm future lives.
- Girls' activism starts within traditional approaches to child participation (e.g. child parliament, children's clubs) but then evolved towards engaging in social justice issues to address inequality and challenges for social inclusion.

Implications:

- Unpack the pivotal need to include gender lens and resistance approaches to understand and support girls' activism.
- Contrast the traditional community values associated with child marriage to the emancipatory views of girls' activists to address potential conflict in communities.
- Explore agency and empowerment as part of girls' activism and their connections to the international development agenda. Is girls' activism a movement born naturally in the girls' communities, or is it an alien concept imposed?

Paper 3

Youth activism in Colombia: transforming communities through youth-led social enterprises

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Theme: This paper is part of the Panel 'Child and Youth Activism: Claiming Spaces in an Unequal World'. As with the Panel overall, this paper will directly address the conference's title -- *Children's rights and opportunities in an unequal world*. It shares learning from participatory projects carried out with young people in Medellin and Quibdo, Colombia. The panel will address the conference theme of 'child poverty, inequality and child welfare research', through the subthemes of 'rights of children and adolescents' and 'children's participation and voices'.

Introduction: It is an accepted premise in the field of childhood studies and children's rights that children and young people's meaningful and non-tokenistic participation should lead to *change*. The nature of this change has been the subject of much debate and may include changes in children's livelihood conditions, in childhood policy and practice, or children developing particular skills and experiences. This paper draws on two participatory projects with young people in Colombia to discuss young people's own views and expectations of taking part in participatory projects and what tangible outcomes they expected as part of their involvement. In particular, the paper focuses on social entrepreneurship and innovation as an 'unanticipated' outcome of these participatory projects.

Methods: The two participatory projects involved Afrocolombian, indigenous and migrant young people aged 15 – 27 in different neighbourhoods of Medellin and Quibdo (Colombia). Both projects utilised digital and in-person participatory arts- and music-based methodologies, and focus groups and interviews with young people and local stakeholders.

Results: Our paper presents critical reflections on how participatory and pedagogical methodologies can foster young people's innovation and entrepreneurial skills as an often overlooked outcome of such projects, particularly with older young people.

Implications: Our findings have implications for understanding sustainability of such projects, and highlight how different groups of young people engaged differently with the projects. We consider how young people's economic activity can be meaningfully and ethically supported by project teams, and how young people's quest for sustainable,

fair and cooperative social entrepreneurship opportunities can constitute a form of youth activism within an economic system characterised by inequality and insecurity. Participatory projects with children and young people tend to draw on approaches and knowledges from different disciplines (for example, sociology, law and rights, geography, education, psychology, anthropology), and our projects highlighted the need to expand this interdisciplinarity through a focus on economics and entrepreneurship in order to address poverty and welfare in holistic ways.

Funding:

AHRC GCRF Changing the Story Large Project Grant / University of Edinburgh SFC GCRF Global Impact Accelerator Grant / ACIDI-VOCA Programa De Alianzas Para la Reconciliacion – Crear Sin Fronteras.

Paper 4

A tale of two youth expert groups: Learnings from youth activism in research from India and Brazil

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Thematic importance: This paper is part of the Panel 'Child and Youth Activism: Claiming Spaces in an equal world'. As with the Panel overall, this paper will directly address the conference's title -- *Children's rights and opportunities in an unequal world*. It will bring learnings from youth expert advisors and co-researchers in India and Brazil. The panel will address the conference theme of 'child poverty, inequality and child welfare research', through the subthemes of 'rights of children and adolescents' and 'children's participation and voices'.

Introduction and objectives: Participatory social research involving young people has flourished internationally over recent years, with youth activism increasingly fuelling and driving these research agendas. This is reflected in the key roles that young people now play, such as youth expert advisors and co-researchers, in research and policy developments. By drawing on an ongoing research project with young people in India and Brazil that looks at youth livelihoods in cities, this presentation reflects on: (1) unpacking adult-youth relationships in youth activism and participatory social research, (2) taking an in-depth look at how intersectional barriers influence access to livelihoods in cities, and (3) reflecting on the engagement models that the project uses to embed youth activists in research.

Method: Young people aged 15 to 26 years old in India and Brazil were involved in advisory and co-researcher capacities to identify research themes on youth livelihoods in their cities. A range of methods were used to carry out the empirical work, such as interviews, surveys and focus groups with young people, community residents and key stakeholders. The young people also played a crucial role in developing engagement and advocacy strategies to take forward into practice and policy.

Results: The project was planned prior to, but started during, the Covid-19 pandemic. The timing necessitated a reflexive and adaptable approach as the adult and youth research team navigated the distances of cross-country research and adjusted to alternative online research methodologies during a global pandemic. Preliminary findings highlight (1) the importance of considering and adapting to context when setting up youth expert groups, both culturally and socially. Their activism and engagement must be seen in relation to their other commitments in life. (2) how diversity and intersectional experiences can be *productively* engaged with in these groups and, (3) reflections on the challenges and tensions in bringing youth activism together with academic research.

Implications: What we will share is the need to problematise and learn from working with youth activists and protagonists about the complex lived realities, as well as the many rewards of cross-country research activities and its learnings. We reflect how relationships and spaces amongst youth and adults are negotiated in research co-production, and critically examine how diversity of identities and experiences also faces risks of tokenism if not productively engaged with. Finally, as this project takes place during the pandemic, we also examine adaptation of youth engagement in times of crisis.

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Paper 5

COVIDUnder19: Learnings from child and youth activism globally

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Thematic importance: This paper is part of the Panel 'Child and Youth Activism: Claiming Spaces in an equal world'. As with the Panel overall, this paper will directly address the conference's title -- *Children's rights and opportunities in an unequal world*. It will bring learnings from child and youth expert advisors and co-researchers across the world. The panel will address the conference theme of 'child poverty, inequality and child welfare research', through the subthemes of 'rights of children and adolescents' and 'children's participation and voices'.

Introduction and objectives: Over thirty years ago, children's participation rights were recognized internationally with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Increased involvement of children and young people in interdisciplinary research has challenged 'traditional' adult research practices in numerous ways and contributed to activism movements. [#CovidUnder19](#) is a movement that aims to foster intergenerational partnerships between children, young people and adult members of the child rights community to develop evidence-based advocacy to uphold children's rights in pandemic recovery and response. This presentation will critically reflect on: 1) The experiences of COVIDUnder19 young people in engaging with online interactive methods of participatory data analysis; 2) highlight strengths, challenges and learnings of the process; and 3) share how engagement in data analysis has contributed to co-creation with child and youth activists on critical issues pertaining to children's rights and wellbeing in COVID19 recovery, to build back better from the pandemic.

Method: Children and young people aged 14 to 19 from countries around the world are involved as co-researchers and advisors in data analysis and knowledge exchange. A range of play and arts based participatory methods were employed in the process. Children and youth play a lead role in knowledge exchange through developing engagement and advocacy strategies to push for change in policies and practices at the community and international level.

Results: The project is ongoing. Children and young people as COVIDunder19 mentors and mentees remain active in data analysis, advocacy, and communication. Preliminary findings highlight: 1) children and young people's strong skills in engaging in quantitative and qualitative research; 2) combining safe, supporting art and play based participatory experiences with skills building initiatives foster space for innovative co-production and engagement; 3) meaningful intergenerational partnerships spearheaded by children and young people can push the agenda globally for critical change.

Conclusions and implications: The study is underway, so conclusions are being developed. Children and young people have been engaged in everyday activism in their communities and at high level political forums (e.g. GPEVAC solutions summit; EADI conference, WHO, UNSRSGVAC) to create opportunities for more young people to be heard and to advocate for meaningful change.