Chapter 17

Child Participation in Ghana: Responsibilities and Rights

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Introduction

Scholars have long debated the definition of a child and when an individual becomes a youth or an adult. The debate revolves around so-called Western ideas that the life span is divided into clear cut age-based categories such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood and senescent (Eriksen 2001). This life cycle thinking assumes that children, under parental guidance, should enjoy their lives: happy, beloved, well taken care of and protected from hazards (Korbin 2003; Stephens 1995; Such, Walker and Walker 2005). The assumption that childhood is universal and a process every child goes through to prepare for adulthood has been challenged, and scholars argue that it is not a valid claim even in the assumed West (Bucholtz 2002; Liebel 2004). Instead, childhood should be regarded as a social construction or, as James and Prout famously argue, “childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture rather than a precursor to it; and ... children should be seen as already social actors not beings in the process of becoming such” (James and Prout 2015, xi). Culturally, the boundary between a child, youth and adult can be blurred, which should be taken into account when discussing child-related issues.

The International Year of the Child in 1979 challenged Western ideology of children and childhood. Images of children’s harsh living conditions all around the world resulted in increased awareness of child abuse and neglect, and demands for special agreements framing child rights issues (Christiansen and Prout 2005; Korbin 2003). Negotiations resulted in the creation of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC, which has been adopted by 170 countries, acknowledges children as individuals with their own rights. Some scholars believe the UNCRC has had a great impact on the international agenda and increased awareness of children’s rights, their life conditions and future potentials (Doek 2009; Lansdown 2010; UNCRC 1989). Others criticize the UNCRC for universalizing child rights and formulating them in the terms of the minority world while ignoring the conditions, culture
and customs of children in the majority world (Tisdall and Punch 2012; Korbin 2003; Qvortrup 1994; Stephens 1995; Such, Walker and Walker 2005). Further, there is disagreement on the three key concepts of the UNCRC, that is, protection, provision and participation, and which of these should be given priority (Olesen 2004). Considering that children are still dying from preventable diseases, some scholars argue the focus should be on protection and provision, underlining that children’s survival comes first as otherwise they will not live to enjoy any rights (Horton 2004). Meanwhile, others claim more success can be attained if children are aware of their rights and are able to fight for them (Gordon, Nandy, Pantazis, Pemberton and Townsend 2007).

Some scholars, children’s advocates and aid workers believe that with the increased participation of the intended beneficiaries, the implementation of projects, legislations and agreements will be more successful (Mikkelsen 2005; UNHCHR 2006). The participation concept has, however, created political tension within the development aid discourse; some claim participation to be critical for successful implementation while others are concerned with what they call the ‘tyranny’ of participation (Baaz 2005; Brown 2004; Cooke and Kothen 2002). Despite critique of the UNCRC and the concept of participation, in the wake of the UNCRC children are reported to have become more aware of their rights and are increasingly fighting for them (Doek 2009; Coly and Torenzio 2007; Ehlers and Frank 2008; Honwana 2013). Likewise, participation has increasingly become popular among international and local development agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Hart 2013; Lansdown 2010).

This chapter examines the participation of children and youth in Ghana in projects executed around the country, mostly by local authorities, NGOs and governmental organizations. Since independence in 1957, Ghana has been considered a forerunner among African states in good governance and democracy. In past years, the government has focused on human and child rights and declared its intention to improve future potentials of young people in the country. Many agreements that, to some extent, cover child and youth participation and acknowledge children as individuals with agency and the capacity to express their views have been ratified and legislated. Participatory projects can be found all around in the country and most of these are sponsored or have been established by government institutions, international and local development agencies and NGOs (Björnsdóttir 2011).

The chapter rests on fieldwork in Ghana carried out from September to December 2010 (Björnsdóttir 2011). Data collection was based on qualitative methodologies, including participant observation, focus group discussions, visual methods and interviews. The participants in the study were girls and boys aged 6–18 years from urban and rural areas and youth aged 19–28 who