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Shifting power in evaluation: Lessons from child-led evaluations

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Background: In 2015, Plan International UK undertook a bold experiment: enabling children in participating in the multi-sectoral programme Building Skills for Life to evaluate the programme.

Objectives: The primary objective of this experiment was to assess if a child-led evaluation is feasible, valuable and desirable. Feasible, in consideration of children's abilities and the intricacies of a multisectoral evaluation; valuable in comparison with expert-led evaluations and desirable in relation to the evidence already available.

Method: These experiments used a range of methodologies to facilitate children's collecting and analysing data to return full evaluative judgements. While these experiments were deemed successful and credible on account of the reviews and support received by the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) community and the donor, the years that followed did not see child-led monitoring and evaluation flourish across the international development sector, despite renewed interest and international commitments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Results: This article explores the contribution these experiences can bring to today's evaluation practice and argues that child participation in monitoring and evaluation is not simply desirable; it is a right and an opportunity to sharpen the objectives of programmes addressed to children.

Conclusion: This article concludes that it is time to abandon M&E practices carried out on children particularly in child-focused programmes and insist on M&E to be, at the very least, carried out with children, if not, as is preferable, by children.

Contribution: This article highlights that involving children in social development aimed at changing the societies in which they will grow up and live, is not a matter of good practice or inclusion, but a matter of justice.

Keywords: child-led evaluation; child-focused M&E; child participation; child focus; localisation; shifting power; participatory evaluation; Cambodia; Zimbabwe; Kenya.

Introduction

In 2015, Plan International UK undertook a bold experiment: enabling children in participating in the multi-sectoral programme Building Skills for Life to evaluate the programme. Eight years after these first[1] ever child-led evaluations of a multi-sectoral programme in the Global South (Hughston 2015a; 2015b; 2015c), the author takes a fresh look at these experiences to understand their contribution to today's practice.

While these experiments were successful in so far as they delivered evaluations deemed credible by specialists and the programme's donor, the years that followed did not see child-led monitoring and evaluation (M&E) flourish across the international development sector, or at least this is what can be inferred by the scarcity of publications on the subject. During the preliminary desk review in 2015, one can see that several organisations developed guidance and resources to assist the inclusion of children in planning, monitoring and evaluation practices, such as Boyden and Judith Ennew (1997) or Plan Togo (2006), but limited progress has been made in the actual practice as observed in Jansen van Rensburg (2020). As in the early search carried out prior to embarking in these experiments, only a handful of examples were found, with slightly more youth-led evaluations, mostly in high-income countries. Furthermore, even when children are involved in evaluations, their involvement is typically limited to evaluating the child participation component of programmes, rather than the entire programme. Although a few notable exceptions should be mentioned especially Passages (2021). Incidentally, these two experiences present many

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1.We call these first child-led evaluation because extensive review has not been able to locate earlier experiments of this type in the global South, but we do not exclude the possibility that others were carried out.

similarities with the experiments discussed here, although in these cases, the child evaluators received greater accompaniment from experienced adults and youths.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic introduced a new drive for child participation in M&E especially by international non-governmental organisations (INGO), although this was not always driven by the desire to fulfil children's right to participation, but rather by the necessity to overcome the restrictions imposed by public health measures. As professional M&E teams were no longer able to visit communities to collect data, they devised new protocols to enable community members themselves to collect data, including adolescents or young adults. To our knowledge, however, this was not accompanied by shift in decision-making power in favour of the young data collectors, but rather their contribution was primarily to reach areas and people off-limits for the professionals.[2]

Curiously, our review also revealed that child participation in research appears to be more frequently embraced than child participation in M&E, judging from the relative ease of finding child-led research reports versus the challenge of finding child-led evaluations. As research and evaluation only substantially differ in their objectives while sharing the same methods, this would suggest that the objections to child participation in evaluations are not rooted in the process, but in power; most specifically the power to issue judgements on the success or failure of interventions designed, delivered and funded by adults.[3] As observed by academics and practitioners, evaluation, particularly of development and humanitarian programmes, is rooted in unequal power, (Segura & Piña 2022), and can reinforce inequalities, (Bagele et al. 2016).

During the intervening years since these experiments, the practice of evaluation has evolved, but crucially, a new consciousness now compels us to consider the practices and frameworks used in evaluation and their asymmetrical power. A new drive to empower local communities in the design and delivery of development and humanitarian projects is taking hold; partially motivated by the desire to improve sustainability, but crucially also in recognition of donors' and philanthropy's role in redressing historical injustices and their legacy of disenfranchisement.

Children, as well as adults, have a right to participate in initiatives that affect them, as recognised in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, but far too often they are not consulted when programmes are designed, implemented or evaluated. Under the guise of their evolving capacity, we fail to involve them to the full extent of their ability, in large part, because of our own concerns, including valid

2. No in-depth analysis of all experience has been carried out as a part of this article and it is possible that cases could be found where, from necessity a new practice, shifting decision-making power to children and adolescents did emerge. We, however, were unable to find pertinent examples in the public domain especially concerning development or humanitarian programmes.

3. It is possible, however, that the disparity between the number of child-led research and child-led evaluation is in fact because of the reluctance to publish child-led evaluations rather than the absence of such practice. We base this conclusion, on observation of materials that have been published and are accessible to the wider public with particular focus on development and humanitarian programmes.

ethical concerns about our ability to protect them. Testing these limitations to demarcate the boundaries between our limitations and their ability was the main objective of these experiments.

Objectives

The child-led evaluations discussed in this article were carried out in three countries (Cambodia, Zimbabwe and Kenya), all participating in the multisectoral Building Skills for Life programme funded by the Department for International Development and intended to respond to seven key objectives derived from the overall goal of the programme: the empowerment of adolescent girls (and boys):

- The first and foremost objective was to understand if a completely child-led evaluation is possible.
- The additional challenge posed by the multisectoral nature of the programme that focused on quality of education, gender and social norms, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), governance, gender-based violence and economic barriers to education, helped us to test the approach to its fullest extent.
- These experiments intended to explore children's ability to return evaluative judgements capable of contributing to our understanding of social change, and in particular, we wished to understand if children would be able to provide evidence-based judgements on all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) criteria, and if their conclusions could be nuanced rather than simply positive or negative.
- Furthermore, we wanted to explore if children who participated in the programme, some of whom faced many adversities, would unearth evidence and opinions different than those collected by adults.
- Additionally, the experiments aimed to assess whether any child participant in the programme had the ability to carry out a complex evaluation or if children with specific skills or competences should be selected to carry out evaluations.
- Moreover, these experiments also sought to gain a perspective on children's understanding of the programme theory of change (ToC) and how it translated in their experiences.
- Finally, we wished to understand if an entirely child-led approach can add value to our perspective.

An additional, unstated, and longer-term objective of these experiments was to inspire future local leaders and equip them with skills to take decisions in a balanced, inclusive and evidence-based manner.

The Building Skills for Life programme's advocacy component relied on articulate and confident adolescents (typically not participating in the programme), to advocate on topics of concern to adolescents, but chosen by the programme's leadership rather than by the adolescents participating in the programme. Aside from the legitimacy concerns this approach raised, there were also concerns of principle. While the programme, on the one hand, was promoting good governance and inclusive decision-making, on the other hand, was promoting charismatic leadership by choosing talented and confident future leaders from outside the programme's

communities, to speak on behalf of the programme's adolescents. We hoped the child-led evaluations would contribute to building the skills and appetite of ordinary adolescents in the programme to promote evidence-based decisions and policies. While we never attempted to explore this outcome, our child evaluators (CEs) reported in their feedback after their involvement, that learning *how to 'take decisions well'* was one of the most rewarding parts of their experience as evaluators. This was later echoed in the findings of a similar experience, Passages (2021), 'Being an adolescent evaluator creates a new awareness of civic leadership responsibilities to represent a diversity of voices'.

Research methods and design

In these experiments, we selected, with the help of participating schools, 10 children (5 girls and 5 boys) for each experiment. The criteria for selection were that they should be willing to participate, attending the programme's schools and target grades, and have a numeracy and literacy level that allowed them to understand percentages. We insisted that CEs should come from a cross-section of participating children and include those with impairments, if possible. Critically, parental or guardian consent for each participating CE was obtained prior to carrying out the exercise.

The methodologies used to facilitate these experiments varied slightly in the three experiences, but in essence relied on the creation of processes and tools that can be broadly divided into the following categories:

Process to enable children to perform their role as evaluators

Through this process, we built the CEs understanding of the programme's objectives, activities, the scope of the evaluation and their role within it. This was necessary because, while all the CEs belong to programme's communities and attended participating schools, we couldn't be sure of their level of exposure to all of the programme's activities, including those involving adults.

As part of this process, the CEs were introduced to the programme's ToC and asked to critique it. The validity of their critique would later be tested through the data they would collect from other programme stakeholders (children, parents, teachers, etc.), and used to reach conclusions on the programme's relevance.

Tools for collecting data

A range of visual and creative tools to aid data collection were presented to the CEs to choose from. The CEs, after deciding on the questions they wished to ask of each stakeholder group, selected from the list the tool they felt would better support them in asking each question, which, of course, also included direct questioning and probing. The tools on the list are all known qualitative tools that were chosen for their more visual and creative nature but also because they presented another advantage: they all render
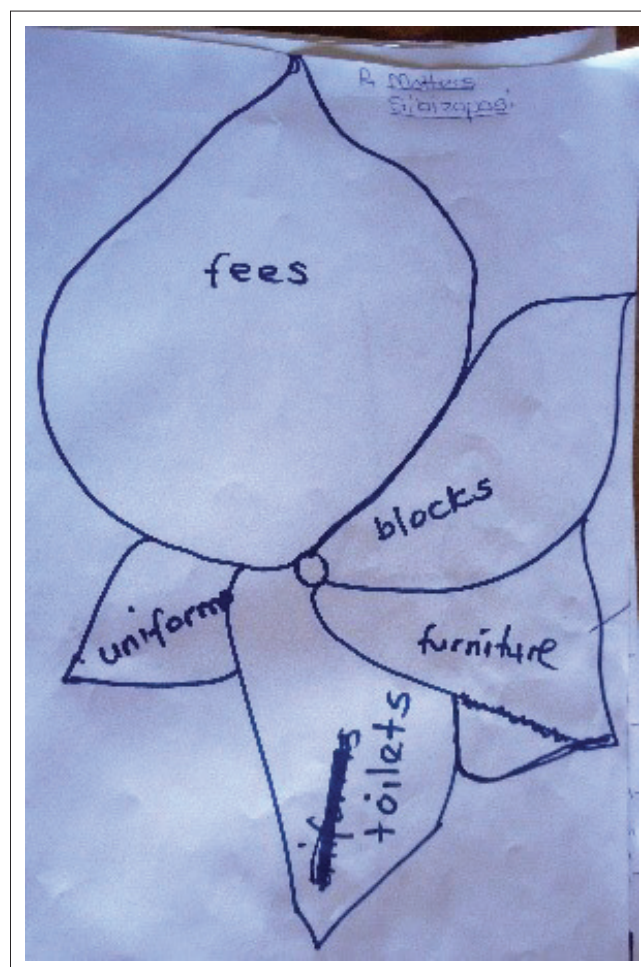
Source: Hughston, L, 2015b, *Transforming a lizard into a cow: Child-led evaluation of the PPA programme in Zimbabwe*, Plan International UK, London

FIGURE 1: Daisy exercise; barriers to education for adolescent girls by importance according to a group of mothers, Zimbabwe.

note-taking easier. Examples of these are body mapping, the daisy (Figure 1),[4] and visual five-point scales, like the confidence snails (Figure 2).[5]

Our observation is that children were just as capable as adults to select the appropriate method to ask each question.

Process for analysing data

The OCED DAC evaluation criteria, while clear, are abstract concepts that children (and probably adults) were not familiar with. To facilitate their understanding, we created a visual representation to illustrate each criterion. For example, to assess relevance, the programme's sectors of intervention, were written on coloured cards, then were ranked in order of importance by both the Plan staff and the evaluation's respondents. The two sets of cards were then laid out side by side, in order of priority, for the programme and for the respondents. The CEs were then tasked to use ribbons to link each sector on one side with the matching sector on the other. The length of ribbon needed was used

4. Asking respondent to draw a daisy representing their own experiences and drawing different size petals to represent the relative importance of different elements.

5. The confidence snails are five images of a snail coming out of its shell and used to measure confidence in speaking out.

Source: Illustration drawn by Emily Woodroofe in 2015

FIGURE 2: Confidence snails.
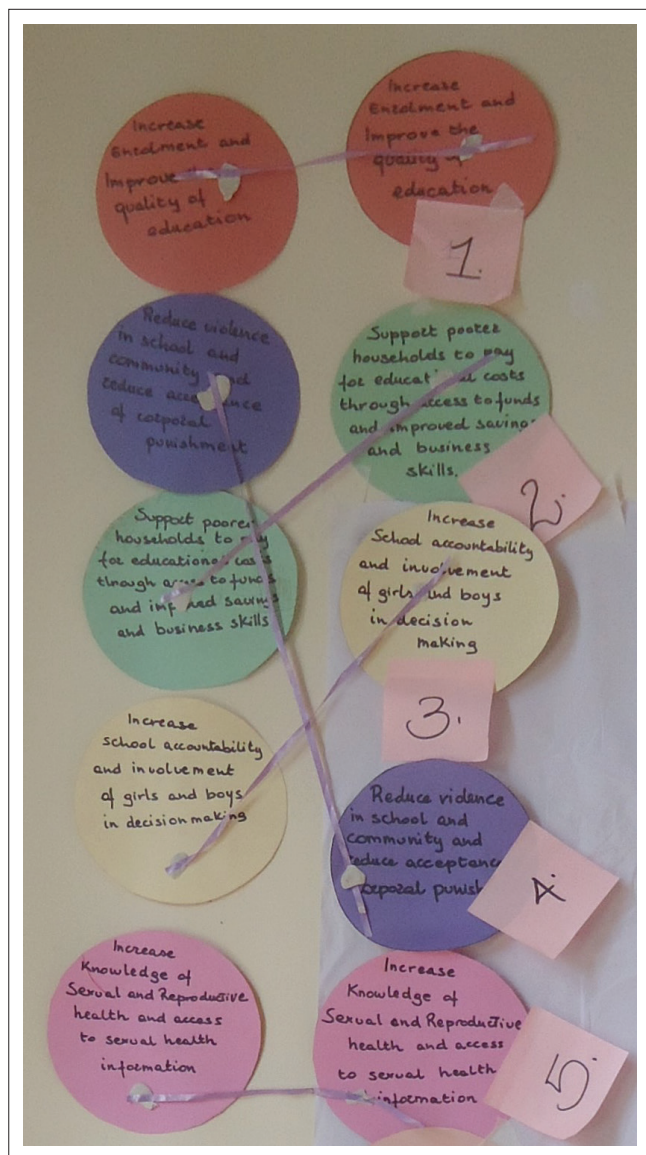
Source: Hughston, L, 2015c, *Okiko in pursuit of a snail: Child-led evaluation of the PPA programme in Kenya*, Plan International UK, London

Note: Figure 3 shows the evidence platypus, produced by the Kenya child-led evaluation (2015c).

FIGURE 3: Relevance methodology visual, Kenya child-led evaluation.

to reflect on the relevance of the activities. (Figure 3). A short length of ribbon would indicate that the programme and the communities assigned a similar level of importance to those activities, while a longer length would suggest the programme had not aligned its priorities with those of the communities.[6]

6.For full description of each of those techniques, see Hughston (2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

The process for reaching conclusions

Criterion by criterion, the data were analysed and debated by the CEs, who were then asked to select the level of achievement justified by the evidence in a series of purposefully created rubrics. Each level of achievement in the rubrics was assigned an animal rather than a number, fearing that the CEs might avoid ascribing a low level of achievement, based on their experiences of grading at school.[7] Hence, the evaluation of each criterion produced an animal as score, corresponding to a description of achievement in a rubric. The combination of the different animals, one for each criterion, was then used to create a fantasy animal summarising the entire evaluation (see Figure 4). The head representing relevance, the front legs for efficiency, the tail that of sustainability and so on. In our experience, all CEs were able to equally participate in this process, irrespective of age and gender. In fact, we observed several passionate debates among CEs over these conclusions, challenging each other on the basis of the evidence they had collected. However, we should note that at this point in the process, the CEs had already spent several days together and had formed a team spirit. We cannot be sure that in a much shorter process,[8] individual traits such as shyness or gender norms might impair their willingness to engage in such debates.

Findings

An entirely child-led evaluation is possible

Eight years later, it might not seem necessary to state this, but at the time, we didn't know. Later, this conclusion was supported by other experiences, including the child-led WASH evaluation commissioned by UNICEF and Save The Children in 2018 and the Passage (2021) experiences. The CEs participating in our experiences ranged in age between 10 and 20, all attending programme schools, and many were in receipt of additional support because of their disadvantaged status.[9]

Children can evaluate a multisectoral programme

In all three experiments, the CEs had no difficulties evaluating the programme or understanding how the different activities

7.This assumption of the CEs willingness to assign low levels of achievement to particular results was never tested but our observation suggests that the concern is unfounded.

8.Our process took approximately 2 weeks in each experience and the debates over evidence and conclusions took place towards the end of this period.

9.In Zimbabwe, a 20-year-old secondary student was selected as part of the CEs as selection was carried out by school grade.

Source: Hughston, L, 2015a, *Acinonyx cervidae hircus: Child-led evaluation of the PPA programme in Cambodia*, Plan International UK, London

FIGURE 4: Apodeixis Ornithorhynchus: Evidence Platypus a fantasy animal created by the levels of achievement identified in the rubrics for each criterion: Reliance representing the head, results representing the body, forelegs representing the effectiveness, hindlegs representing the efficiency, tail representing the sustainability and equity representing the antlers. Reliance representing the head, results representing the body, forelegs representing the effectiveness, hindlegs representing the efficiency, tail representing the sustainability and equity representing the antlers.

Source: Hughston, L, 2015c, *Okiko in pursuit of a snail: Child-led evaluation of the PPA programme in Kenya*, Plan International UK, London

FIGURE 5: Girls review their sector ranking during a focus group discussion, Kenya child-led evaluation, from full report (2015c).

contributed to the overarching goal. The ranking exercise (Figure 5) provided excellent insights into the CEs, appreciation of the logic of the ToC. Not only did the CEs have no difficulty understanding the connections between different sectors of the intervention but they were also perfectly capable to identify points of tension. For example, in Kenya, the CEs observed a contradiction between increasing enrolment and improving the quality of education. Without additional resources, particularly teachers, increasing enrolment results in lowering quality, as the teacher-to-student ratio increases. Moreover, the CEs had no difficulty making the distinction between concept failure and implementation failure, as the discussion on SRHR in Cambodia demonstrates. The CEs observed how, in principle, SRHR is an important barrier to education, particularly for adolescent girls, but the programme's implementation of these

activities rendered the outcomes difficult to evaluate. While the activities had been carried out according to plans and respondents recalled the information had been imparted, the content did not align with the objective. The programme had promoted messaging aimed at delaying sexual activity and emphasising the risks, while knowledge of the reproductive system and how to prevent pregnancy, a barrier to completing education, had not featured. Consequently, the effectiveness of this component in increasing knowledge and improving student retention, could not be fully evaluated, as it was never implemented as intended.

Children can return rich and nuanced assessments

In all three experiments, children were able to produce rich and nuanced assessments that reflected the voices and diverse experiences of different groups. A noteworthy example of this was the case of Zimbabwe. The CEs felt that the experiences of boys and girls, mothers and fathers were quite different and decided to return a different evaluations from the perspective of each group, refusing to level or average their diversity. Across the board, the CEs neither had difficulty in identifying when stakeholders' groups had different experiences nor relating these to the intervention logic. Often, this happened in relation to the gender focus of the programme that, at times, translated into an emphasis on girls and women, which was occasionally perceived as disadvantaging boys and men. For example, in Cambodia, the CEs reported that the programme's focus on girls' education was far from intuitive because enrolment and completion were higher for girls than for boys, who were under greater pressure to become economically independent.

Children can unearth insights adults wouldn't otherwise access

In all cases, the CEs were able to occasionally surface different perspectives that adult-led data collections had not uncovered. These insights often related to criticism of adults by children. For example, in Cambodia, children uncovered some dissatisfaction with teachers' competence and in Kenya and Zimbabwe they reported teachers circumventing codes of conduct to continue administering (banned) corporal punishment. Adult-led data collection had resulted in students reporting high levels of satisfaction with their teachers even in response to direct probing of these very same issues.

An interesting insight, not involving criticism of adults, emerged in Zimbabwe. Here, the evaluation found that girls had reported an unforeseen change in adults' (parents, leaders, etc.) attitudes towards their education. Adults were not simply encouraging girls' enrolment as per the programme's objectives, but girls felt they also encouraged them to take 'harder' subjects, and felt adults had higher expectations of their academic abilities. This was a fascinating insight because the programme had neither considered this dimension of community support for girls'

education nor thought to include it as an indicator of success.

In all cases, however, new insights only concerned the experiences of children while the CEs did not uncover different perspectives from adults.

With the right facilitation all children can be evaluators

The criteria for selecting CEs only required that they attended the programme's schools and that they were able to understand percentages. The researchers insisted on the inclusion of disadvantaged children, including children with disabilities, in line with the programme's criteria. The researchers found that all children were able to participate, including the youngest (10 years old). To maintain a child-led approach, CEs were never assigned roles but chose how they participated. While personalities played a role at first, soon they all choose to experiment with the different roles (asking questions, taking notes, etc.) and divided tasks among themselves. By the time of analysing the data, the confidence of even the shyest had grown to the point that they all participated equally in reaching conclusions. Having collected the data mostly in pairs, data analysis required sharing information with the entire team of CEs. All children were able to do so and very happy to participate in the exercise called 'arguing like lawyers': where one CE takes one side of an argument, for example, a particular level in a rubric and another argues against it using the evidence collected.

Children can understand and critique a theory of change

Our CEs were perfectly able to understand and critique the programme's ToC. The accuracy of their critique was tested during the discussion of the relevance criterion. In Cambodia and Zimbabwe, CEs correctly detected barriers to education that the programme had not identified at the onset and found their logic was validated by respondents.[10] However, as community priorities were not assessed at the onset, it is hard to say if some barriers had decreased in importance because of the programme's work or if they were of a lower priority to start with. Additionally, CEs also proved their ability to recognise and discard socially desirable answers that could not stand up to scrutiny.

An entirely child-led approach to evaluations is worthwhile

The modest cost of these experiments combined with the additional insights we gained, led us to conclude that an entirely child-led approach is not only mandated by our values but also has many programmatic benefits. Firstly, the evaluative judgement and insights gained with this approach were as rich and evidence-based as any other

evaluation the programme had commissioned. Secondly, the additional insights the CEs were able to uncover were very valuable for our understanding of how the project was performing. Thirdly, the empowering nature of the experience contributed to changing the perspectives of some programme stakeholders regarding children's abilities and their own commitment to accountability. Limited as this effect was, it nevertheless contributed to the programme's empowerment objectives.

Reflections on the way forward

At the time of these experiments, the fact that in all three cases the CEs were able to use the OECD DAC criteria and deliver a comprehensive evaluation seemed like a success. However, once we are no longer under pressure to demonstrate a completely child-led process is possible, we should acknowledge that evaluation frameworks such as the OECD DAC criteria are rooted in a cultural heritage and perspective removed from the CEs' and communities' experience.

In order to hand over power, as evaluators of international development programmes, we need to acknowledge that we have held it for longer, and that those typically excluded from it, never had to exercise it. Consequently, we are better at it. We are more skilled and confident in the processes of evaluating and better at producing evaluation products because the standards of a credible evaluation are defined in our culture and our power. Truly handing over to children the power to evaluate should include the power to redefine the reference framework to be closer to their realities and culture.

Additionally, we need to acknowledge that participation, whether by children or adults, has a cost. In the examples discussed here, we compensated the CEs for their time.[11] If, however, one were to truly make programme participants (adults or children) co-creators rather than mere participants, we ought to recognise the exponential increase in opportunity cost this would engender. As noticed here, these experiments were conducted in the 4th year of a 5-year programme. Here, the opportunity cost for CEs was, at least in part, offset by the potential return of improvements in the programme they participated in. Moreover, in this case, the programme extension was guaranteed, removing from the CEs' shoulders the concern that a negative assessment might result in the interruption of services. Typically, however, evaluations are carried out at the end of activities. We therefore ought to consider whether democratising M&E by bringing it closer to the communities where programmes are implemented may also require rebalancing our efforts from the E to the M.

As these and other experiences show, the choice to involve children, and programme participants more broadly, in

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10. In Kenya, while the CEs had proposed additional areas of intervention in their view important to the programme, their respondents validated the programme's choice of priorities.

11. Not wanting to compensate children with money for legal and ethical reasons, we choose to compensate them by giving them materials for their education they would otherwise have to pay for, such as notebooks, pens but also school uniforms etc.

M&E is not simply one of principle, it is one of necessity. As remarked by Hulshof (2019), 'Programmes evaluated by only adults will not necessarily take account of children's perspective and experiences, and the opportunity may thus be lost to enhance impacts'. Social change often occurs first in personal choices, viewpoints, values, and aspirations, and children can help us explore and understand theirs and their peers' realities. This is critical if we want to design for sustainable change but is also imperative if we hope to contribute to broader systems change. However, we must also find a way of empowering children to evaluate, or ideally co-create programmes without burdening them with the responsibility to find solutions to injustices not of their making, as noticed by Johnson, Lewin and Cannon:

> Our findings suggest that we urgently need a cultural shift that recognises children's and young people's ability to make decisions and take action, while avoiding shifting the responsibility to them. (Johnson, Lewin & Cannon)

Limitations of the approach

As much as these evaluations were child-led, the programme's objectives and the OCED DAC criteria used for the evaluation were pre-determined and not questioned or adapted as part of these experiences.

To integrate a more local and child-led perspective, the CEs carried out a shadow tree analysis (Figure 6)[12] of the programme's logic, which was helpful to surface potential blind spots. But this was mainly from the point of view of validating our ToC rather than collaboratively creating one.

To reach conclusions, the CEs used data they collected themselves, primarily qualitative, alongside quantitative data collected by the programme as part of regular M&E activities. However, where the children's own questions differed substantially from previously asked questions, no equivalent baseline could be provided. Sometimes this rendered conclusions difficult. For example, when the CEs' critique of the programme's ToC pointed to 'missing' sectors of intervention (sectors that should have been considered according to the CEs but not included in the programmes design), it was impossible to establish if those additional sectors were relevant at the onset, but the programme had failed to identify them, or if they had emerged more recently and, perhaps, only after other more pressing concerns had been addressed by the programme.

While the programme covered several locations, the CEs collected data only in their own and neighbouring communities (althought they were also provided with quantitative data

12. The shadow tree analysis is a facilitation process built on the known problem tree analysis, which consists in creating a pictorial representation of the programme's logic as a tree with the branches representing the symptoms or problems the programme intends to resolve, and the roots the root causes of those problems, while the trunk reppresents the activities undertaken to resolve the problem. To allow the CEs to critique the programme logic, firstly we presented to them the logic of the programme using the tree representation, then asked the CEs to add 'fruits' to the tree to represent additional concerns and dimensions of the problem which they considered important but not covered by the programme.
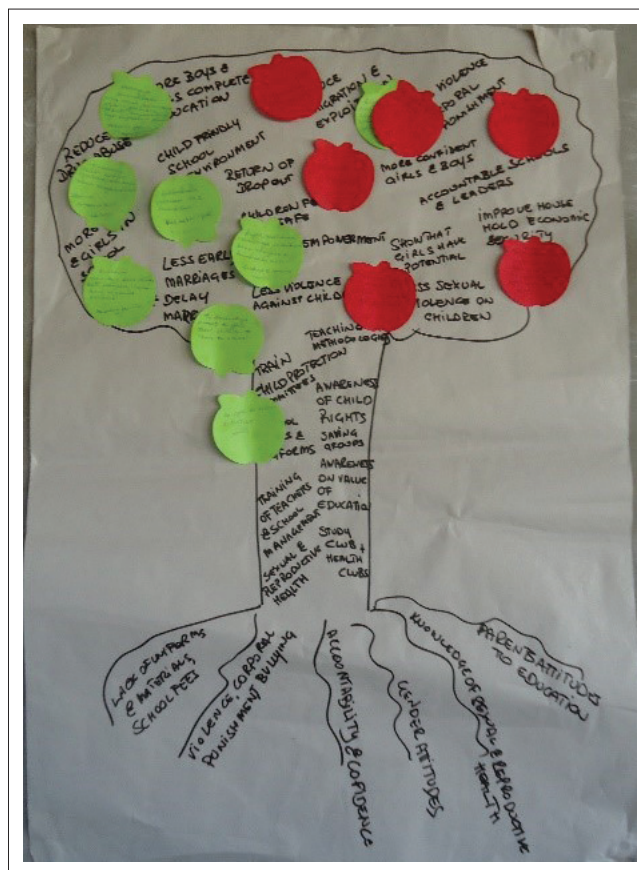
Source: Hughston, L, 2015b, *Transforming a lizard into a cow: Child-led evaluation of the PPA programme in Zimbabwe,* Plan International UK, London

FIGURE 6: Shadow tree analysis, Zimbabwe child-led evaluation.

collected from across the entire programme area). These evaluations, therefore, could not provide any insights into differences in implementation and results across all geographical areas of implementation.

Just as the programme's design, the analysis of intersectionality in these experiments lacked depth. Gender was considered as binary and efforts to include children with disabilities, while successful in both the programme and the child-led evaluations, were far from transformative. When analysing equity in all three countries, the CEs reflected that the programme was not designed to address the needs of the most disadvantaged children because it targeted post-primary education. In their own words, the most disadvantaged would not engage with post-primary education because survival is their primary concern, not education. This observation would suggest that children, with the right support, could analyse intersectionality more comprehensively.

While there is an increased drive for development and humanitarian programmes to become more participatory in design, monitoring and evaluation, including through child-focused methods, a distinction should be made between involvement by children and leadership by children. In addition, a child-led approach or a child-focused approach may not always be possible or even desirable in some cases.

We should recognise that, while these experiences were not extractive in nature, neither the children nor the communities had asked for an evaluation. The purpose of these initiatives was not to start a new dialogue on development objectives. This was an experiment driven by our desire to learn and shift some power towards children while retaining control over the programme ourselves.

Conclusions

Children will inherit and renegotiate power dynamics for themselves in their communities, making childhood and their transition into adulthood a critical juncture in the development of more equal and inclusive societies. If we wish to fuel their role in shaping a more equal future for their communities, we should also acknowledge our responsibility in creating spaces to facilitate their learning of what works and what doesn't. This must include creating their own reference frameworks and of course, give them the opportunity to fail, just as we ourselves have had.

To do so, we must call time on M&E of child-focused programmes being carried out on children and insist on M&E to be, at the very least, carried out with children, if not, as is preferable, by children. Practitioners can contribute by advocating and by publishing their experiences, good and bad, to reinforce and establish a new norm. As our review showed, the lack of reported experiences of child-led M&E added to the uncertainty of these experiments. Further publications can provide reassurance for managers and commissioners on the validity of such an approach.

Donors concerned with sustainability and systems change, should recognise that failure to involve children is not simply a violation of their rights; it is a missed opportunity to improve and drive change. Moreover, those committed to the principles of trust-based philanthropy may want to consider the implications for their M&E frameworks, of supporting local initiatives and if this or similar approaches can contribute to their objectives.

Ultimately, the one should acknowledge that deciding what to measure is inherently a political choice. It determines whose voice will count when decisions are taken, and it attributes prominence to one perspective over another. Evidence is the lens through which decisions will be taken and policies established. Involving children in social development aimed at changing the societies in which they will grow up and live, is therefore not a matter of good practice or inclusion, but a matter of justice.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

This article was written by myself, L.H., and provides perspectives and reflections on work conducted by myself in 2015 while working for Plan International UK. The work of others is referenced, the uniqueness of these experiences makes them hard to compare or combine with other's perspectives. The purpose of the article is to present this unique experience to other practitioners with the view that they might learn from these, adopting or adapting some of this work into their own practice, where they feel it might be relevant.

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Data availability

No data were used for this article. Data relating to the original child-led evaluations are transparently laid out and accessible through the original reports, all of which are referenced in the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessary reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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