UNICEF’s new framework for adolescent participation: Experience and reflection

Harry Shier
CESESMA, San Ramón, Nicaragua

…and Misean Cara, Dublin

Overview

1. UNICEF’s “Adolescent Country Tracker”
3. The new draft framework
4. What is an adolescent and why does it matter?
UNICEF believes that:
“Advocacy and action for adolescents have been hampered by the lack of a concrete results framework that can be used to describe the state of the world’s adolescents and serve as a basis for setting goals and targets”.

(UNICEF 2016a)

So UNICEF has been working on an outcomes-based framework to describe the wellbeing of adolescents across the world, the “Adolescent Country Tracker” (ACT).

The ACT will provide a set of global indicators closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals.

THE AIM OF THE ADOLESCENT COUNTRY TRACKER IS TO SUPPORT AND STIMULATE A RIGHTS-BASED AND INTERSECTORAL APPROACH TO ADOLESCENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

The ACT highlights five domains of adolescent wellbeing:

1. Adolescents attain their highest physical health & mental well-being
2. Adolescents are actively engaged in learning through formal or non-formal education opportunities
3. Adolescents feel safe and supported in their families, among their peers, and in their schools and social/virtual environments
4. Adolescents participate in non-exploitative and sustainable livelihoods and/or entrepreneurship
5. Adolescent girls and boys engage with opportunities to form and express their views and influence matters that concern them

These indicators provide a snapshot of the physical, economic and social environment in which adolescents live, learn, play and earn.

(UNICEF 2016b)
Not only do we not know what are the appropriate global indicators for adolescent participation ....

... on further reflection we don’t really know what “adolescent participation” means.
A new challenge...

The Search for the True Meaning of Adolescent Participation

- Hire a top consultant to lead the search.
- Form an International Expert Group to guide the search.
- Draft a new Framework Document.
- Gather the International Expert Group in New York for two days of intense discussions.
- Use new Framework to generate indicators to complete the Adolescent Country Tracker.

2. International Expert Group Meeting, New York, January 2017

Mixture of UNICEF people from different sections and countries, experts from other UN agencies and leading INGOS in this field, and a few academics.

(It was recognised that adolescent voices needed to be heard too, but it had been decided that this was not the best time or place for that).
We explored many models:

Adolescent-led participation
Collaborative participation
Consultative participation

But were left with a few minor issues still to resolve...

What adults support ↔ What adolescents themselves do
Ladders/levels of participation ↔ Non hierarchical approaches
Rights-based ↔ Outcomes-based
Benefits the young citizen ↔ Benefits the whole society
Power-sharing with adults ↔ Adolescents with autonomy and independence of action
Creating structural conditions ↔ Enabling personal and collective agency
Traditional ways of organising ↔ Online, connected, cyber-participation
Strengthening institutions ↔ Making revolution, overturning institutions
Pro-social, constructive participation ↔ Anti-social, delinquent or disruptive participation

(UNICEF 2017)


First published in Spanish in Medio Ambiente and Urbanización (Shier, 2008),
English translation appears in the Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation (Shier, 2010)
On Day Two, we tried to identify essential elements of the new framework.

I took all the participants on a trip through a time portal that allowed them to visit a parallel future world where adolescent engagement and participation had been fully realised.

While there they were able to travel around and observe many aspects of life in that world, before the portal closed and they returned home to our own world.

Back in our own world, the group discussed and reflected on their experiences and this became their starting point for identifying the essential features they wanted to see in the new framework.
The final report appeared a couple of months later, along with a first draft of the new Framework Document.

But …

- We have not been able to agree on the meaning of “adolescent”.
- Nor have we reached a consensus on the meaning of “participation”.

1. Participation as a human right.
2. Participation in Practice: This looks at all the models, levels, spheres, enabling factors, types, forms and features of participation.
3. Monitoring and accountability: Starts to look at how we might meaningfully measure and evaluate adolescent participation.

4. What is an adolescent and why does it matter?

In defining “Adolescence”, UNICEF have gone for a neuroscience perspective, and adopted the WHO definition as 10-19 (i.e. from your 10th birthday to the eve of your 20th birthday).

From a human rights perspective it would have been better to define adolescence as from 13-17 (eve of 18th birthday) – which is also the standard legal definition throughout Latin America.
The path chosen by UNICEF means:

- Only 80% of adolescents are UN-defined children with CRC rights. 20% are adults and so have no rights at all under the CRC, but have full adult autonomy and the civil and political rights that go with their adult status.

- This makes any meaningful discussion of adolescents' human rights unnecessarily complicated and often confused.

- It also makes any discussion of the relationships that exist between adolescents and adults complicated and confused.

What happens now?

- Expert Group members have sent back feedback on the draft Framework Document, and it is currently undergoing further revision. We hope to see a final version published soon.

- UNICEF will then go ahead with determining the missing indicators from the ACT matrix.

- And there will be an international piloting phase.

- UNICEF is currently recruiting a consultant to design an “Interactive Dashboard” to show live ACT data for all countries on its website.
So much effort devoted to what is essentially an act of defining.

As researchers we have to define our terms.

Definitions can limit our ideas and set boundaries to what we can conceive of...

In the case of adolescent participation, we don’t want a definition (or indicators) that limit or constrain what is possible.

On the contrary, we want to expand possibilities, allow for new and different thinking, break chains and cross frontiers...

Thanks for listening
References:


http://www.harryshier.net/docs/Shier-Pathways_to_Participation_Revisited_Handbook.pdf


(For unpublished papers or where no URL is given above, you can contact me for copies)

[All photos, CESESMA, used with permission and consent; except slides 8 and 12, photos: UNICEF]