

Venezuela: promoting active citizenship in rural children

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The author is General Director of the Fundación las Iseletas (Fundaisletas), a non-profit organisation that developed the CECOFAIN project in the state of Anzoátegui, Venezuela. This programme focuses on the holistic development of young children via family participation. Within this, it has developed a response to the profound transformation that Venezuela and its political life is going through, and the impact of this on the rural world and especially on young rural children. Taking the long term view, it promotes active citizenship in children. To make this work, the project sets out to change the perceptions that adults have of children, and of the roles that society has assigned them; helps adults learn to listen to children and take into account what they suggest; nurtures the generic capacity to participate that children have; and provides the means and the opportunities necessary for children to participate.

Here in Venezuela, thinking in the long term, and reflecting on the profound transformation that our country and its political life are undoubtedly going through, citizenship is a central concept that is of growing relevance. In reflecting on this concept, I will start by trying to respond to three questions: what do we understand by citizenship? Why does it preoccupy us? and to what extent do we Venezuelans have or want it? I will then reflect on how, in its work, Centros Comunitarios de Orientación Familiar y Atención Infantil (CECOFAIN – Community Centres for parental orientation and child care) is promoting active citizenship in rural children.

What do we understand by citizenship and why does it preoccupy us? Here we want to refer to the definition that Adela Cortina offers:

*Citizenship is a relationship between an individual and a community, a relationship through which the individual feels her or himself to be a member of that community with full rights, and also feels a permanent loyalty to that community.**

José Mayora, the Venezuelan Sociologist, adds that:

Exercising citizenship means that towns don't just have inhabitants, they have citizens, people

who know that the quality of their life depends in considerable measure on what they do, on what they contribute to building the collective.

So, to be a citizen is to behave like someone who defines reality by what she or he does as a citizen. A citizen is not someone who hopes that others will build the reality that she or he would like to have.

In that sense, it is possible to affirm that, in practice, to be a citizen means enjoying the same rights as everyone else, but also means accepting responsibilities – whether governing or being governed. The key characteristic of the democratic

conception of citizenship is self determination on the part of the citizens themselves: they are agents of their own lives within a cultural/legal/value framework. In the same way, local, state and national governments have to function responsibly, must respond to the needs of society and, at the same time, account for what it has and has not done.

In practical terms, citizenship means participation in public life: it's a social status in which all citizens have the same rights, and in which conditions are equal for all.

However, in contemporary societies, freedom is relative. Equality before the law may be a reality but so are inequalities in access to, and availability of, resources. From this reality arise themes of inclusion and exclusion, and of the qualities or types of citizens depending on their social, economic, historic, cultural or ethnic positions.

These problems are not new, but they have assumed greater relevance over the last decades because of the rise in the numbers of new socio-economic minorities, by the fight for emancipation by minority groups, by threats to well-being and, in general, by threats to participation by citizens and by processes of social marginalization at the end of the 20th century.

Building citizenship in Venezuela

In Venezuela, there has been a strong cultural conditioning that limits active citizenship; a long tradition of hierarchy and centralisation, of passivity and the delegation of decisions. This is part of our colonial legacy and has translated itself into the nature of our institutions, institutions that express our deficits as citizens: we see them, and in them we

see ourselves. In this culture, there are three critically important deficits: in responsibility, confidence and participation. Yet these three attributes are fundamental if people are to stop delegating and make themselves into active agents of their own lives.

But, what can we do? How can we reconstruct that which we jointly share, through citizenship? In our opinion there are two key ways. The first is the most elementary, the simplest, the most routine: we have to discard the idea that our individual contributions are trivial. In the public spaces that we all share, there is a great deal that can be done by practical and responsible citizens. No contribution is trivial ... but we do have to relearn the value of the individual contribution in the collective effort.

The second way is through conscious and systematic education for citizenship. By that we mean, the express and explicit promotion of citizenship in all people, educating them and educating ourselves and each other, as much by what we do, as by organised and systematic education. It is from this perspective that Fundaisletas works in six rural communities in the State of Anzoátegui, creating learning spaces in which the capacity of people – including children – can be developed and unleashed, so that they can be agents of their own development through participation. That participation is learned, is built, is taught.

The need for change

Within the widespread crisis of poverty that our country is living through, it is the rural population that is most disadvantaged. The quality of life in the countryside is very precarious, as can be seen in the high child mortality and morbidity rates,

the continuing inadequacy of housing, the lack of most basic services, the dietary deficiencies and the poor communications. We haven't achieved a just distribution of land, fair access to credit or a reasonable level of modernisation; while the uneven distribution of income continues because labour is less well rewarded in the rural sector.

The potential of rural dwellers has not been sufficiently nurtured and focused, and that potential is not therefore available for local, regional and national development. Neither does education lead to a rational use of rural resources and the consequent big increase in the productivity of the rural labour force. The education that rural dwellers have received has not given them the resources that they need to stay in the rural environment, nor to improve their productivity: the difference between an educated rural individual and a non-educated individual is almost imperceptible.

In short, the world of rural Venezuelan children, their families and communities is of a world full of deprivation and despair. One of our biggest challenges is to overcome the scepticism of people who believe that things cannot improve for them, that there is no possibility of change, and that they must resign themselves to accepting life just as it is – a scepticism that is transmitted from one generation to another.

The task now is to invest in the necessary processes and create opportunities for participation: the most effective vehicle to bring about change is to replace waiting and resignation with participation in change.

To sow the seeds of citizenship through participation is a complex process that requires innovation and a



Adults can change their perception of children



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change in practices. It is also an educational process because to educate properly is bring out in a person, all of the participative faculties that they are gifted with. In addition, the development of participative competencies invokes all aspects of education: knowledge; abilities and skills; attitudes and values.

Promoting participation from childhood

What does this mean when we work with children? The right of children to be citizens is recognised in

the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) promulgated by the United Nations in 1989. This document recognises, clearly and explicitly, the important roles that children play in society, and their capacity to participate in society and to enjoy defined civil and political rights that go much further than just their protection and other basic needs.

The CRC also established as fundamental the need to inform children of their rights so that they know them, understand them and can insist that they are met. Subsequent other documents stress the need to promote child participation and also that of parents and children, as a way of developing their sense of community responsibility and making citizenship a real experience for them.

In the specific case of children, to develop citizenship requires:

- that adults change their perceptions of children, and of the roles that society has assigned them. To do this is to recognise the generic capacity that children have for participating as active and committed citizens.
- That adults learn to listen to children and take into account their ideas and suggestions.
- That the children's generic capacity to participate be nurtured so that they can use it effectively – something that is best done through practising participation, applying the principle of learning by doing.
- That the means and the opportunities necessary for their participation be provided.

The children of rural Venezuela – and their parents and other members of their communities – have considerable constraints on them in terms of participation. It costs them a lot to offer their

opinions and to make proposals to others. Their levels of participation are low, being reduced to simply attending or participating in activities that are organised and directed by someone else. Given these realities, CECOFAIN works with children, their parents and other significant adults, to promote children's participative abilities and capacities. We do this through interactive and experiential learning (learning by doing), providing children with the means, the space and the opportunities to practise their right to participate.

This kind of learning facilitates children's accomplishments in the four dimensions of communication discussed earlier: knowledge; abilities and skills; attitudes; and values. At the same time, we work with their mothers and other significant adults, to ensure that institutional spaces in which they are developing – such as their homes and schools – are democratic structures that facilitate children's socialisation, make them feel accepted and understood, give them room to express their own feelings and emotions in their own way, encourage them to think and develop their own initiatives, and experiment to develop their competence and their self-esteem.

We facilitate learning experiences that develop children's ability to communicate among themselves and with adults. This means promoting their interests and skills so that, in small groups, they can progressively learn to discuss and agree plans for activities, set the rules and later tell the larger group what they have done. It is also important that they see that their words influence the conduct of other children or adults, or events that they are associated with.

These experiences also help children to learn and understand the values of justice and solidarity and the usefulness of respecting obligations that have been made, and norms and rules that have been agreed – without the need for supervision or punishment.

In the project, children have the opportunity to plan for the fulfilment of their wishes or objectives, and they understand that this is the best way for those to be attained. Planning allows children to express their interests, choose activities and material, take decisions, resolve difficulties, seek solutions to problems – and accept the limitations that sometimes arise. All of these actions facilitate the development of autonomy, self-expression, self-esteem and the appreciation of others and their needs, attitudes that are so necessary for a democratic conception of living together.

In a subsequent phase, we create spaces for participative consultation, in which children are asked about their views on matters that, directly or indirectly, concern them. This encourages them to think, to propose, to make judgements and to value the fact that there are channels open to them. Then, as they become more active, they move beyond thinking to acquire a greater commitment and a sense of co-responsibility. At this level, the questions demand greater involvement and are more about what they are going to do and how they are going to do it, rather than about what they think and, hypothetically, how they might take action. The activities or projects that were once in the hands of adults, are taken over progressively by the children themselves.

Gradually, the children acquire more maturity in their participation, developing their ability to organise communal activities, developing their own projects

and developing actions that will bring about changes in their families and communities.

But in all of this kind of work with children, it is very important to keep in mind that what they attempt must not be too abstract for them and must be achievable. Objectives must be within what they understand, and they must have sufficient information with which to express their opinions and take action.

Consolidating the transformation

As a result of the work we have done on developing participation, a group called ‘Vigías Comunitarios’ (Community Lookouts) has been formed. It is made up of adolescents and youngsters of 13 years and older. Here, they build themselves up as actors and agents in change: they relate well inter-personally; promote creativity; develop their social commitment; and acquire consciousness of their socio-economic realities, and of the transcendental importance of becoming leaders who can transform the conditions of their lives and those of their communities.

In working with them, our programme has a high level of training and community participation, structured around three components:

- personal development, strengthening their abilities and personal skills to work on behalf of the community;
- the knowledge, abilities and skills necessary to take on central roles in the community and perform them well; and
- studies and their continued development so they will be able to work productively as adults.

Our commitment

Our programme has only a short history. But our experiences make us cautiously optimistic about the strategies we have implemented to promote citizenship through participation in rural children and young people.

In contexts in which a large proportion of the population lives in poverty, as is the case of Venezuela where 70 percent belong to the lowest socio-economic sector, strengthening active citizenship, promoting the involvement of people in processes that affect them, is both a necessity and a means to resolve their problems.

Therefore, one of the biggest challenges of this century should be the social construction of citizenship. Teaching and learning is one of the best ways that teachers and social workers have, above all in their work with poor children, especially those of the rural sector. □

Note

* This definition by Adela Cortina, and the subsequent one by José Mayora, were formulated during the cycle of conferences called ‘Institutionality, Government and Society’ organised in June 1999 by the Fundación SENSА and the Industrial Chamber of the state of Lara, Venezuela.