

Circles of Support Project

**Guidelines for Child Participation
in COS**

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Child Participation in the COS Project

This document has been prepared to provide a short introduction to child participation. Child participation covers any activity that involves children addressing challenges that they face. It does not repeat the reasons why child participation is important. These reasons are discussed in the Circles of Support (COS) Toolkit. Instead this document outlines six ideas to build child participation in COS activities.

Before starting any child participation activities it is important to answer a few key questions. These questions are discussed in the boxes below. The questions will help you to think through why you are getting involved in child participation and what your approach will be.

The questions are:

- ◆ Which children should be involved in child participation activities? Is it all children or vulnerable children only?
- ◆ How will I make sure that my child participation activities do not further stigmatise vulnerable children?
- ◆ How deeply do I believe children should be involved in COS activities? For example, do children have a role to play in decision-making?
- ◆ Who will lead the process of starting child participation activity in my COS project?
- ◆ Weighing the benefits of child participation against the risks?

Take time to discuss these important questions with your colleagues.

BOX 1: Which children will be involved in my child participation activities?

It is important to decide which children will be involved in your child participation activities. The literature on children's participation varies on which children should be involved. In some cases, it makes sense to involve all children, but in other cases it is often more appropriate to involve vulnerable children only. This question is intricately linked with the question of stigma, as it is important to prevent any form of discrimination, while at the same time ensuring that the role of vulnerable children is not diluted and their voices are heard.

One of the advantages of child participation is that it can help build resilience in children. The finding of the Circles of Support children's study suggest that girl children may have less opportunity to solve their own problems. This is because social norms make it more difficult for girls to find piece work or temporary shelter. Also there may be greater expectations of girl children to perform household duties and to care for sick caregivers and/or younger siblings. It is important that programmes for vulnerable children prioritise the girl child.

Remember:

It is essential that any child participation activity adheres to basic issues of child safety and protection!

Adults must make sure that there is safety for all children who get involved.



BOX 2: How can I avoid further stigmatising vulnerable children?

A key consideration for any project working with vulnerable children is how to avoid any further discrimination. Children are stigmatised in the following ways, through:

- Avoidance by others
- Rejection by others
- Moral judgement passed by others
- Discrimination
- Abuse from others.

Stigmatised individuals and children often self exclude themselves, hold a negative perception of themselves, withdraw from social situations, sometimes over compensate by being too friendly and fear to disclose information.



While HIV and AIDS affects everyone, issues of stigma often hamper many programmes from succeeding as children and adults perceive involvement with such programmes would invite scorn and contempt from the community. Also children may already feel the impact of stigma and will need to be supported to participate in activities.

Thus it is imperative that ways to reduce stigma is a key component of any effort to involve children in activities. Ways of doing this will have to be carefully considered when choosing an approach to child participation activities.

BOX 3: How deeply can children participate?

One of the key questions facing the COS project is at what level is participation to occur; is it to gain insight from children into their lives or is it to actively involve them in the decision-making process that affects their lives and their futures?

The COS pilot project commissioned a study titled “Children’s Voices” which recorded children’s experiences of being vulnerable, their experience of the COS project and the ways in which they would like to be supported. The findings of the study showed the value of listening to children’s ideas.

Included in these guidelines are other ideas to ensure that the thoughts of children are heard. However it is important to consider is this enough? For example, is it possible to include children in the decision about whether to start a food garden to support vulnerable children? Often collecting children’s ideas such as through discussion groups can be managed as a short term activity. Managing the on-going participation of children in the decision making of a project is a long term commitment. Therefore it is essential that there are long term resources and commitment to support this. The right of children to participate in decisions that affect them is set out in the UN Convention and is often referred to as meaningful participation.

BOX 4: Who leads the process of child participation activities?

Child participation needs to start at the local level in schools and in neighbourhood COS groups. To get things started it is essential that there are adults who understand the importance of child participation and who are able to lead the process. These individuals need to receive some extra training or support to ensure that they are ready for the task ahead. It is essential that these individuals have good facilitation skills and also have the time to see the initiative through.



BOX 5: Weighing the benefits of child participation against the risks

When planning a child participation activity it is essential to ensure that the benefits for children outweigh the risks of harm. In this way, an ethical decision for child participation can be reached. Look at the table below for ideas.

	Benefit to child	Harm / risk to child
Physical	Exercise, fresh air, play, relaxation	Danger to life or limb e.g. swimming pools
Emotional	Increased confidence, safety, laughter	Expose child to activities that cause anxiety or fear
Social	Part of a team, learn to manage conflict	Bullying, unmanaged group conflict
Intellectual	Learn to plan, evaluate, analyse	Boredom, activities too easy or too difficult

Options for Child Participation Activity in the Circles of Support Project

The following options have been drawn from a wide variety of literature on child participation implementation in countries across the world. These options are discussed because of their relevance to the COS project. The options are:

1. Children's Advisory Teams
2. Children's Discussion Groups
3. School Councils
4. School Clubs
5. Life skills and HIV and AIDS teaching
6. School-based competitions.

Each of the options offers a range of opportunities and constraints which will have to be debated and discussed before an approach can be selected.

Children's Advisory Teams

General Information

The aim of child-advisory teams is to establish representative teams of young people to advise adult-led projects for children and young people. Such teams have been established in Bosnia and Herzegovina, composed mainly of disadvantaged children and their advocates. In Yugoslavia, the child advisory teams create opportunities for children to participate in civil society; they are involved in activities such as publishing child-friendly publications and posters, supporting child-led actions, and peer education programmes.¹

For the COS project a local, regional or national children's advisory team could be established to advise on the development of the COS project. The establishment of the team would have to be facilitated as would meetings of the team to ensure meaningful input. However, older children could be trained to take a leadership role in the team. In general, children's advisory teams are best for children aged between 10-18 years old.

Objectives

- Involve children in programme planning and priority setting
- Ensure children's views and priorities are integrated into programme work
- Offer children the opportunity to influence the design of programmes meant for their own benefit.

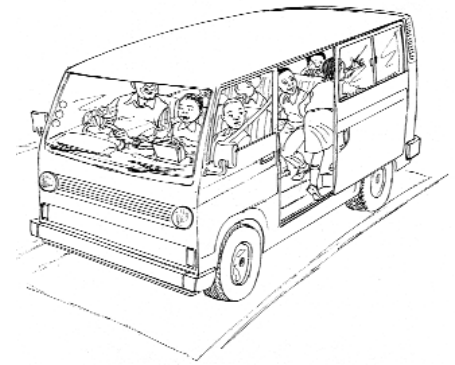
How?

- Select child representatives from each participating COS school
- Establish regular meetings of the child advisory team
- Ensure integration of the outcomes of the child advisory team into all levels of the COS project

¹ Children's Rights Information Network (CRIN) Newsletter. October 2002. *Children and young people's participation*. Number 16, pp21-22.

Budgetary considerations

- Transport and communication costs for child representatives
- Training for facilitators
- Ad hoc budget for other child led activities such as posters, T-shirts or other intervention
- Training for young people



Timeframe

- Identify a lead facilitator for this initiative
- Motivate initiative within schools, Ministry of Education and COS project structures
- Training for facilitators
- 3 months to establish first Child Advisory Team

Children’s Advisory Teams

Opportunities	Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops organisational and leadership skills in children • Resources and know-how available through Save the Children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires significant adult involvement and support • Can be costly to set-up • Best suited to older children (10-18 years)



Children’s Discussion Groups

General Information

Children’s discussion groups can be widely used as a means of gaining information from children about their lives and circumstances. Discussion groups in the COS project can be held in a local community, in a school or at the regional level. Discussion groups can be a one off intervention or they can meet regularly to discuss matters related to the COS project. The discussion groups are facilitated but can discuss issues related to children’s lives as well as the progress, success or challenges of the COS project. Discussion groups lend themselves to bringing together children who face similar challenges.

Although older children (10-18 years old) can easily participate in a discussion group, younger children can be involved if interactive group activities such as drawing and games are integrated into the group experience. This would however require that facilitators are trained to do this.

Objectives

- Organising children from defined geographical areas into groups that meet either once off or on a regular basis
- To discuss issues that affect children's lives as a result of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, or more general issues related to social and emotional well-being and other aspects of vulnerability
- To facilitate information sharing between children and with children
- Provide feedback to the COS project on the way in which children's lives are affected and provide insight into the possible interventions that are necessary for the COS project to operate successfully

How?

- School convenors and neighbourhood agents trained to facilitate and set up discussion groups
- Topics for the discussion groups developed in consultation with the children by the convenors and agents
- Ensure integration of the feedback from the child discussion groups into all levels of the COS project



Budgetary considerations

- Transport and communication costs for facilitators of discussion groups
- Training for school convenors and neighbourhood agents to lead the discussion groups

Timeframes

- Identify a lead facilitator for this initiative
- Motivate initiative within schools, Ministry of Education and COS project structures
- Training for facilitators
- 3 months to establish first discussion groups

Children's Discussion Groups

Opportunities	Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can target children who face similar issues • Flexible agendas identified by children • Limited travelling • Information sharing • Can involve children of all ages • Extends role of school convenors and neighbourhood agents for those who would enjoy the work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining different agendas for children of different age groups • Increased involvement for school convenors and neighbourhood agents implying increased workloads and commitment for some



School Councils

General Information

School councils are widely used in organisations involved with children's issues and rights as a means of actively involving children in decisions that directly affect their lives. Such councils are created within the school environment and are used to mobilise and involve children on a wide range of issues. The aim of school councils is to encourage increased involvement of children and young people in decision-making processes at various levels through the election/selection of representatives.² School councils are an excellent opportunity to discuss a range of school and community matters and it is likely that this initiative should not be just set up to address the needs of the COS project.

Objectives

- Involve children ages 10 years and above in decision making
- Mobilise children to think about and take action on a wide range of issues
- To assist in information gathering and dissemination with children and young people

How?

- Elect or select representatives across the different grades in schools where children are aged 10 years and above.
- With the help of a facilitator decide on a way forward for the Council and decide the range of issues to be discussed and addressed
- Children identify their own role and agendas for the Council
- Host a meeting twice every school term
- Report back to COS project after each meeting

Budgetary considerations

- Materials for communication and information sharing
- Training for school convenors, neighbourhood agents and other teachers to set up the School Council

Timeframes

- Identify a lead facilitator for this initiative
- Motivate initiative within schools, Ministry of Education and COS project structures
- Training for facilitators
- 3 months to establish first School Council meeting



² Children's Rights Information Network (CRIN) Newsletter, October 2002. *Children and young people's participation*. Number 16.

School Councils



Opportunities	Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves all children of 10 years and above in a school • Doesn't need to be restricted to the COS project. Can be part of the general functioning of a school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires commitment from school principal and teachers • Must be willingness of school structures to listen to the thoughts and decisions of children and young people • Better adapted for older children i.e. senior primary and high school • The integration of issues specifically related to vulnerable children may need sensitive handling

Clubs

General Information

Children's clubs involve a more recreational form of children's participation, and represent an innovative way of encouraging children to take action in their personal lives and in their communities. They require the assistance of adults who have access to ideas and information to help structure the club. This may involve individuals outside the school or may come from an organisation that promotes a specific type of school club. Two highly successful experiences of clubs dominate the literature, these are *Soul Buddyz* in South Africa, and *Anti-Aids* clubs (highly successful in a range of African countries).

The Soul Buddyz Clubs in South Africa are a joint initiative of the Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication and SABC (TV) education, in collaboration with the Department of Education. Their vision is to "create a platform where all South African children can acquire additional knowledge and skills related to health issues, and be empowered to realise and voice their rights, needs and interests and interact with peers on an educational and recreational level".³ The club's theme is "Reflection and Action" and aims to encourage children to actively observe their communities and the dynamics therein, to reflect on issues affecting them and to take appropriate action to manage problem situations more effectively.⁴ Most of the clubs are housed within primary schools, but also occasionally utilise libraries. Schools generally have the most available infrastructure in terms of venues and teachers to oversee the clubs and assist where necessary. While the clubs aim to encourage fun and recreation, their main objective is to acquire and enhance knowledge and skills related to health issues and to promote community involvement.⁵

³ <http://www.soulcity.org.za/09.03.asp>

⁴ <http://www.soulcity.org.za/09.03.asp>

⁵ <http://www.soulcity.org.za/09.03.asp>

The anti-AIDS clubs have been successfully used at schools in a number of African countries and aim to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS among their fellow students in an interesting and effective way, and to learn how to take the same message in to their local community. They have largely been initiated by Christian based organisations, and have been successful in countries like Uganda, Zambia, Ethiopia, and Malawi. In Uganda the clubs have focused on conveying information through drama, songs and dance; in Zambia the clubs members pledge to remain celibate before marriage and being monogamous within marriage, to teach friends about HIV and AIDS and to help people who are infected or ill; in Ethiopia the clubs have focused on drama, counselling and prayer; and in Malawi the clubs perform songs, plays, poems or acrobatics at school functions as a way of raising their peers' awareness of HIV and AIDS.⁶ The possible danger of anti-AIDS clubs for the COS project however is the use of the term "anti-AIDS" to increase the existing stigma associated with HIV and AIDS.

Before launching a new club COS schools may find it helpful to network with other school club initiatives and to talk to other organisations for support.

Objectives

- Encourage children to have fun while at the same time involving them in improving their personal lives and the community
- Focus on the development of lifeskills for children and young people



How?

- Decide on the type of club and it's range of activities
- Invite children to enrol
- Allow children (with the help of adults) to decide on the key events and activities
- Hold regular weekly meetings during school term time

Budgetary considerations

- Can require some funding to establish clubs if new materials are needed to support the club activities
- A small budget for club activities may help sustain interest in the club
- Training for club facilitators

Timeframe

- Identify a lead facilitator for this initiative
- Motivate initiative within schools, Ministry of Education and COS project structures
- Training for facilitators
- 3 - 6 months to establish (finding out about other school clubs and collecting materials to use in the new club may take time to complete)

⁶ <http://www.christianaid.org.uk>

Clubs

Opportunities	Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fun and educational• Can include all children including children under 10 years of age• Provides additional social activity for children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires support of schools and adults in the community• Can lose focus on the special needs of vulnerable children



Life Skills and HIV and AIDS Teaching: *Stepping Stones*

General Information

Talking and learning about HIV and AIDS provides an opportunity not only to address HIV risk in children but also to talk about the impact of HIV and AIDS on children. There are many training programmes and materials developed to do this. A well known training package is “Stepping Stones”. Stepping Stones is a process that offers ordinary community members the opportunity to create their own responses to the threats and effects of HIV and AIDS. It is somewhat different from the other options in that it involves both children and adults in a more collaborative way. Stepping Stones is essentially a training package in gender, HIV, communication and relationship skills. It is also a life skills training package looking at why we behave in the ways that we do, how gender, generation and other issues influence this, and ways in which we can change our behaviour, if we want to. The training package promotes gender equity, inter-generational respect and solidarity with HIV positive people, in a human rights framework.⁷

The training package consists of a 240-page manual for trainers, with full, closely guided instructions on how to run around 60 hours of workshop sessions, over 10 - 12 weeks. Sessions are divided into small groups of 10 - 20, of their own gender and age, and occasional sessions bring everyone together. Young children aged 10 and above are encouraged to join the adults in their communities in these workshop sessions.

A package such as Stepping Stones can be adapted to meet the needs of a specific environment. However, all HIV and AIDS training will require that facilitators have undergone sufficient training.

Objectives

- To allow community members and children to develop their own responses to the challenges posed by HIV and AIDS
- Develop life skills in both adults and children

⁷ <http://www.stepsstonesfeedback.org>

How?

- Select adults and children to participate in workshops from schools and community
- Identify times to meet for workshops
- Identify facilitators to conduct the workshops

Budgetary considerations

- Training materials for workshops such as Stepping Stones need to be purchased or copied
- Training for local facilitators
- Refreshments for the workshops (optional)

Timeframe

- Identify a lead facilitator for this initiative
- Motivate initiative within schools, Ministry of Education and COS project structures
- Training for facilitators
- 3 - 6 months to set up
- 10 - 12 weeks for the workshops (depending on the programme that is adopted for each school)

Stepping Stones

Opportunities	Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involves children and adults• Existing materials are available• Published success stories in many countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires an intense time commitment (difficult for children and adults involved in school, community and family responsibilities)• Requires skilled facilitators• Not directly aimed at children



School-based Creative Competition

General Information

Schools are at the centre of this option. Competitions can be initiated at each of the participating schools in the COS project or across a number of schools involving essay writing, art, poetry, dance and music. Much of the literature on children's participation suggests that children are best heard through creative expression of art or words, depending on the age of the child.

The purpose of such a competition would be to encourage children to express their feelings and thoughts around HIV and AIDS in a non-threatening way, with the incentive of a prize as a reward for their effort. Essays, poetry, music and dance are used successfully for children of older ages (12-18 years old), and art, music and dance can be used for the younger children (6-11 years old). Such competitions require buy-in from the participating schools, and involve increased workloads for involved teachers. However, the competition can help teachers discuss HIV and AIDS with their class and can encourage networking with local organisations and other schools who can become involved in the organisation or judging of the competition. It would be important to think through the value of the competition. For example, a prize could be awarded to a class that thinks of a creative way to support vulnerable children in their school.

The competition can be used as part of a participatory process to identify the issues that concern children about how HIV and AIDS impacts on their lives.

Objectives

- Allow children to express themselves creatively in a non-threatening manner
- Elicit information from children on their experiences of HIV and AIDS.

How?

- Identify local partners who will be involved in the competition and identify a prize/s.
- Prepare a brief for the competition.
- Brief teachers about the competition and what is expected of them.
- Run competitions in each participating school
- Organise judging and award of prizes.
- Use the materials produced by children to gain and share information about HIV and AIDS and the experiences of vulnerable children

Budgetary considerations

- Materials maybe required, particularly stationery and art materials
- Prizes for the winners of the competitions
- Refreshments for award ceremony

Timeframes

- Identify a lead facilitator for this initiative
- Motivate initiative within schools, Ministry of Education and COS project structures
- 3 - 4 months

School-based Creative Competition

Something
to think
about!

Opportunities	Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involves all children (not only vulnerable children)• Easy to organise• Fun• Can use existing school resources• Involves finding out children's views and opinions in a non-threatening manner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased workload for some teachers• Some financial burden for schools in terms of finding prizes for children and additional stationery if needed• Element of competition and incentives needs to be considered in relation to fostering support for children impacted on by HIV and AIDS• Preliminary and limited form of child participation



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