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Hearing Their Voices: Evaluating children’s empowerment in Rongoa Island\*

Master of International Development (120 credits)

# Background/ Rationale - (*keep this section to no more than half- page)*

There are now 2.6 billion children and young people living in developing countries (Oxfam, 2016a). Children and young people have huge potential to achieve change in the present, and as future citizens, the success or failure of development policies will affect them the most (Oxfam, 2016b). Yet, much of the work that surrounds children and young people in development studies has been to consider them indirectly, if at all, despite the fact that the young are evidently present as targets of development interventions, and often feature on the covers of development reports and textbooks (Scheyvens, Scheyvens and Murray, 2014, p. 189-92). By marginalizing children’s voices in development studies, development policies, projects and practice risk having little meaning for, or effect on children’s lives. Although extensive work has been done on conceptualizing power, and women’s empowerment in development studies, the literature in relation to children’s empowerment is confined to the western traditions of education, psychology and social work. There is a substantial gap in the literature in regards to children’s empowerment in development studies. It is this gap in which my research will be situated.

This project aims to conceptualize empowerment from the perspectives of children living in informal settlements on Rongoa Island. By analysing an existing CANVA NGO children’s empowerment programme, from the perspective of children in Rongoa Island themselves, I aim to uncover a better understanding of how development policies and interventions affect children through their own eyes. In doing this, I will make a contribution towards a better conceptualization of the interface between children studies and development studies, whilst arguing that these two disciplines do not need to exist in isolation (Huijsmans, George, Gigengack and Evers, 2014).

# Literature Review - (*keep this section to no more than a page)*

Although the work of Rowlands, Moser and Kabeer look at women’s empowerment in developing contexts, no substantive work has been done in regards to children’s empowerment in developing countries. However, there is a huge amount of work that has been done in the west on children’s and youth empowerment. In an important study which brought together and analysed over 454 pieces of academic work on youth empowerment 6 dimensions came through. These were: 1) Personal growth and well-being: the reinforcement of self-esteem; 2) Relational: changing relationships between youth and adults; 3) Educational: the acquisition of competencies and participation in change; 4) Political: being involved in, and influencing institutions and the decision making process; 5) Transformative: developing the consciousness and skills necessary to envision social change and take action; 6) Emancipative: young people acting in their own name and on their own terms (Martinez, Jimenez-Morales, Maso and Bernet, 2016, p. 6-8). These dimensions of youth empowerment are not so different from the work of Rowlands, Kabeer and Moser. The educational, political, transformative and emancipative dimensions above can all be seen as addressing strategic youth needs discussed by Moser, while the personal and relational elements are strongly related to the idea of personal and relational empowerment that Rowlands advocates.

Inherent in the dimensions of youth empowerment above, and referenced explicitly throughout the literature is the notion of participation. In a defining text on children’s participation, Roger Hart (1992b) created a typology for children’s participation. This typology is based on the premise that children can be involved in projects or decisions on many levels, but that in order to move from tokenism to true participation (empowerment), we should always aim to involve children on at least rung four of his ladder.

The various aspects of non-participation and participation according to Hart are: manipulation; decoration; tokenism; assigned but informed; consulted and informed; adult initiated, shared decisions with children; child initiated and directed and; child initiated, shared decisions with adults (Hart, 1994a). When conceptualized in this way, participation addresses all three aspects of empowerment – personal, relational and collective. When children are involved in decision making processes and taking action, not only does this increase self-confidence and efficacy, but it allows them to shape relationships with adults and address strategic youth needs.

Proponents of (collective) empowerment have been criticized for making assumptions that local communities are homogenous entities whose members have the same values, interests and disadvantages. Post development theorists stress that communities are diverse and that the power relations and inequities that exist at the national scale often exist at the local level too (Scheyvens, 2009,p. 469). Nira Yuval Davis (1994) argues that the homogenizing of large groups such as women, strips the power relationships that exist between them. Constructions which assume a specific identity politics which naturalizes social categories denies shifting boundaries of identity and internal power differences (Yuval Davis, 1994). The relational and collective aspect of women’s empowerment discussed above is focussed on changing the subordinate position of women in relation to men. Similarly, the relational and collective aspect of children’s empowerment is associated with changing the subordinate position of children in relation to adults. Ashan (2009) shows during her research with children in Bangladesh that although children are certainly subordinate to adults, they are also embedded in other relational power structures. These other social groups with power dynamics between them include, but are not limited to gender, disability, ethnic group, and class (Ashan, 2009, p. 393). Any discussion of children’s empowerment in development studies therefore needs to be aware of these differing power dynamics between young people. Focusing solely on children as a singular category may at best disguise these other power structures, and at worst, encourage them.

From this discussion on power and empowerment it is clear that there is a huge gap in the literature when it comes to conceptualizing children’s empowerment in developing contexts. Extensive academic work has been done on power and women’s (among other groups such as the poor) empowerment in development studies, but children’s empowerment has generally be confined to western contexts and is mostly written about in the western academic traditions of education, social work and psychology. Although there is much crossover between how empowerment is conceptualized in the various traditions – cultural nuances and the importance of other social categories and the power dynamics between them are often missed in the western context. My research aims to understand how empowerment is defined and measured by children that live in informal settlements and are involved in a CANVA NGO children’s empowerment programme who have to struggle with subordination in relation to adults, but also other concerns such as gender, class, vulnerability to natural disasters and forced eviction to name but a few.

# Key questions - (*keep this section to no more than half a page)*

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| Aim: To understand in what ways CANVA NGO Rongoa's children’s empowerment programmes empower children | | |
| Research Question: To what extent, and in what ways, does CANVA NGO Rongoa facilitate the empowerment of children? | | |
| Sub-questions | Methods | Sources |
| How is the empowerment of children conceptualised by CANVA NGO Rongoa? | Document analysis, key informant interviews | Programme reports, M&E documents, planning documents, programme managers |
| What are the current indicators of children’s empowerment within the programme? | Document analysis, key informant interviews | Programme reports, M&E documents, planning documents, programme managers |
| Does CANVA NGO Rongoa’s conceptualisation of and indicators for children’s empowerment reflect the reality for children involved in the programme? How do they conceptualise empowerment? | Focus groups, interviews, workshops, photo voice, participatory visual methods drawing), co-creation of indicators with children | Children involved in the programme |
| In what wats have the children who have been involved in the programme feel empowered? | Participatory ranking for quantitative data, semi-structured interviews, participant observation | Children involved in the programme |

# Proposed Methodology – (*keep this section to no more than a page)*

Because I am seeking to measure empowerment, it is important that the research process itself is empowering. However, because I am also seeking to analyse the programme, from the perspectives of children, it is equally important that I am able to gather some quantitative data, in order to make some broad claims and generalizations. Because of this, I am taking a mixed methods approach to research within a constructivist lens. I am not seeking to uncover “truth” or objectivity, rather, I am seeking to capture and understand the meaning of children’s actions. Whatever is real, or important to the children involved in the programme is important to the research (Moses and Knutsen, 2007, p. 10-12). In order to do this – I am borrowing lessons from a broad range of traditions. I will be conducting a type of short ethnography, as my primary purpose is to grasp how children themselves see and interpret the world around them. This requires the acceptance that there is no singular truth, and that multiple realities co-exist. Finally, my research also crosses into action and participatory research, as I am aiming to co-conduct the research with children themselves, working with and alongside them in order to effect change (O’Leary, 2010, p. 156-178).

Taking all of this into account, there will be several methods I will need to use to keep within the methodological framework and answer the research questions. In order to first understand how CANVA NGO defines and measures empowerment I will conduct document analysis from existing programme design and monitoring and evaluation documents. I will add depth to this through key informant interviews with CANVA NGO staff. Once I have an understanding of how CANVA NGO conceptualize empowerment, I intend to co-create some indicators for empowerment with children in the programme through focus groups, workshops and photo-voice/participatory visual methods. Once we have created some indicators together, I am seeking to work with the children to gather the data. Because traditional methods for gathering quantitative data have been said to be disempowering, I am proposing to use participatory methods, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) ranking, to gather this data (Chambers, 2007). Once we have carried out the research together, I will add depth to these broad findings and aim to triangulate the data by undertaking semi-structured interviews and participant observation with the children. Using all of these methods, I am going to have rich data that will need to be analysed. Initially, in the field, I will be using a type of grounded theory in order to create indicators for empowerment. Therefore, during this stage of the research, data analysis will be part of the data collection methods. The second step of data analysis will be much more deductive – I will be analysing in what ways children feel empowered, based off the indicators that are created. In order to do this effectively, I will have to undertake both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. For the qualitative data, I will use thematic analysis, based on the indicators. For the quantitative data, I will need to familiarize myself with PRA methods for statistical analysis as I am unfamiliar with these at present. Using both of these methods for data analysis will allow for the triangulation of rich data, whilst making it workable and leading to an effective analysis and addition to existing theory.

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1. \*This is a fiction name for the purpose of this example only [↑](#footnote-ref-1)