

BEYOND THE ASEAN CHILDREN'S FORUM: EXPLORING AND IMAGINING SPACES FOR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN ASEAN

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The right of all children to participate in all matters affecting their lives is internationally recognized and enshrined within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Despite ASEAN member states' reservations about the Convention, the said right is recognized through the ASEAN Declaration on the Commitments to Children. Also, the ASEAN Commission for the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) included the need to develop an enabling environment for children's participation as one of its key priorities. The rights to participation has also helped frame the establishment of the ASEAN Children's Forum as an institutionalized consultative mechanism for children to influence the regional body's policies and programs.

This paper critically examines the structure and modalities of the ASEAN Children's Forum.

The paper poses a problem that the representative model of participation ironically reinforces exclusion of several children within the region. Also, while aimed as a space for children, it has likewise been detached from the immediate contexts of children. Furthermore, the paper identifies key concepts towards an alternative framework for child participation in ASEAN that imagines spaces that are inclusive and pluralistic, and characterized by transnational processes that recognize, connect and reinforce different sites where children exercise agency.

1. Introduction

The right of children to participate in matters affecting their lives is widely recognized under international law, notably the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC). As a duly recognized right, states and non-state actors are duty bound to undertake steps to ensure that children meaningfully participate in spaces and decision-making processes that have an implication on their rights. The UN CRC in particular obligates duty-bearers to ensure that children have access to information, to participate in cultural life, and to express views freely using appropriate media.

Such right has also been recognized at the ASEAN level. In the 2001 Declaration on the Commitments for Children in ASEAN governments committed to “[c]reate opportunities for children and young people to express views, advocate their rights and concerns, and participate in community development”. Such commitment was then further sustained by creating a space for children to participate directly in influencing ASEAN’s further strategies and plans of action through the ASEAN Children’s Forum.

This paper intends to critically reflect on the ACF as the institutionalized space for participation of children in ASEAN. The concept of space for participation is informed by Gaventa (2006, p. 26) who viewed it as “opportunities, moments, and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests”. Space in this context is not viewed as neutral but is shaped by power and designed as a means of control (Gaventa, 2006). Space of participation can also be examined by looking at “how they were created, and with whose interest and what terms of engagement” (Gaventa, 2006, p. 26).

In examining the ACF as a space for participation, this paper will first explain the concept of child participation as a human right. Second, in order to understand how child participation can be operationalized in the context of policies and programs, the paper will present child participation models derived from literature. Third, the paper critically examines the structure and modalities of the ASEAN Children’s Forum by raising issues of non-inclusivity and its limited impact within the decision-making process inside ASEAN. Also, while designed as a space for children, it has likewise been detached from the immediate contexts of children. Lastly, the paper brings to light possible conceptual tools to help develop a critical lens in viewing and reimagining spaces for child participation within ASEAN.

2. Children’s Participation as a Human Right

The rights stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), according to Verhellen (2000, pp. 80-81) could be classified into the following: “protection”, “provision” and “participation”. Cantwell (2000) said that participation was as a new category because it has never been incorporated in any child-focused international

instrument prior to the adoption of the CRC. The term participation does not appear in the text of the CRC. However, existing literature has pointed out to Article 12 as the provision establishing such right. And as will be explained later, there are also additional provisions in the CRC that guarantee such right.

The following are the articles considered to be relevant to the right to participation. First is Article 12.1 which stipulates the “[t]he right of the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters concerning affecting the child, the views being given weight depending on the age and maturity of the child...” (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2007, p. 686). Second is Article 13.1 that entitles the child to the “the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice” (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2007, p.686). Third is Article 15.1 that obligates governments to “recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly” (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2007, p. 687). Lastly, Article 17 mandates governments to “recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources...” (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2007, p. 687).

In understanding the meaning behind the right to participation, Lansdown (2001, p. 2) explained both the substantive and the procedural aspects of Article 12 of the CRC. As a substantive right, Article 12 entitles children to be agents in their own lives and to participate in the decisions that affect them. As a substantive right, it calls for state obligations to undertake measures to guarantee children’s participation.

The General Comment No. 12 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child expounded further on the obligations of states under the Convention. In the said document, states must ensure that mechanisms are in place to solicit the views of the child, to give weight to those views, to combat negative attitudes and customary conceptions of the child that can hinder participation (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009a). Over all, the state is obliged to create an environment that respects, supports and encourages children to express their views (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009a).

It is important to note, however, that the same provision has a claw back clause, i.e., the weight of a child’s view depends on his/her age or level of maturity. This is a crucial clause because there would be different interpretations of this right depending on the way meanings and roles are attached to each child’s level of development. This is problematic because the provision would have different standards, for example a 17-year old child’s opinion would have a different bearing compared with that of 7-year old. In addition to this, the opinion of a child having limited capacity to articulate her issues due to the lack

of opportunity to study would have a different weight compared with that of a highly educated child. It is necessary to point out that the child's competence does not develop according to standards of development stages. There are external variables that affect the development of the child's mental, emotional and spiritual growth (Protacio-De Castro et al., 2002).

On the other hand, Article 12 was considered by Lansdown (2001) as a procedural right. As a procedural right, it refers to the "means through which to achieve justice, influence outcomes and expose abuse of power." Adding to Lansdown's explanation, the researcher thinks that beyond Article 12, Articles 13, 15 and 17 are key provisions to enrich the procedural aspect of the right to participation.

Indeed, the close association of Article 12 and the other provisions, specifically Articles 13 and 17, has been established by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in their General Comment No. 12 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009a). The said committee pointed out that the child's right to freedom of expression and the right to access information is vital towards the effective exercise of the right to be heard (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009a).

Considering the views of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, it is important that there is access to relevant and comprehensible information in order for the child to cultivate his/her opinions. There should also be an access to flexible venues for the child to express his/her thoughts individually or collectively. Moreover, ensuring the right of a child to communicate his/her views through various media including those of his/her choice is vital.

3. Existing Models on Children's Participation

Much literature on children's participation has presented models that have been influential to the design of programs and projects of many organizations working with children. These have cited the works of Roger Hart (1992), Harry Shier (2001) and Gerrison Lansdown (2001). A discussion of these models is necessary in order to provide an operational understanding of child participation as a human right and how it can be put into practice.

One influential and well-cited model is the "ladder of participation" that was conceptualized by Hart (1992). This model illustrates the increasing participation of children from different levels of non-participation to full-participation. Each level of participation describes the extent to which children are involved in decision-making.

The eight levels of participation proposed by Hart (1992, p. 8) are as follows. First is manipulation, which is characterized as a situation where children are involved by adults but the children do not have understanding of the issues and their actions (Hart,

1992, p. 9). Second is decoration, which is characterized as a situation where children are involved but are limited only to providing entertainment and to provide proof that they are being involved (Hart, 1992, p. 9). Third is tokenism, which is a situation where children are being given a voice but not a venue for them to consult and process inputs together with other children they are supposed to represent (Hart, 1992, p. 9). The fourth level, called “assigned but informed”, is characterized by a situation where children understand the rationale of the project and volunteer to take on roles they will play in implementing the project (Hart, 1992, p. 11). The fifth level, called “consulted and informed”, is a situation where adults involve children in the conceptualization of the project and that children volunteer to play roles in implementing the project (Hart, 1992, p. 12). The sixth level, called “adult initiated and shared decisions with children”, is a situation where adults initiate the project but there is room for children to influence and make decisions side-by-side with adults (Hart, 1992, p. 12). The seventh is called “child initiated and directed”, whereby children alone initiate, conceptualize and implement projects (Hart, 1992, p. 14). The last level is called “child initiated and shared decisions with adults”, whereby children lead the conceptualization and implementation of the project but they have equal standing with adults in terms of decision-making (Hart, 1992, p. 14).

Hart's (1992) model could be helpful as a means of analyzing or assessing the participation of children in programs or projects of organizations. However, there are limitations to this model. First is that it is one dimensional, meaning the model is hinged only on the aspect of decision making. In this regard, the model assumes that children are automatically interested and capable of engaging in decision-making. Hart (1992) did not provide room to explore the possible situation where children would opt not to participate in decision-making because of limited capacities and external constraints such as those that are beyond the control of children, e.g, situations of armed conflict or natural disaster.

Second limitation of Hart's (1992) model is that it gives an impression that each organization or agency should seek for the highest level of participation, i.e., “child initiated and shared decisions with adults.” This might pressure organizations and children even though the situation is not ripe for such level of participation. In aiming to reach such level, organizations, adults and children should make a self-check using the important considerations, such as the understanding of the existing capacities of children to be involved in certain roles, the appropriate venues where children could comfortably engage, and the resources available for children.

Third limitation of Hart's model is that it only referred to the process of participation. Apart from the process, it is important to take into consideration the political and social context as such could define the rationale, content and method of participation of children. For example, the absence of a democratic space that would allow any form of participation in policy-making might urge children to take up arms as the only option to achieve social change. Poverty, on the other hand, might hinder young people to do

voluntary work and instead opt for a paid involvement in the project implementation because of the need to earn income for the family.

A revision of Hart's model was developed by Shier (2001). The model titled as "Pathways to Participation" removed the three lowest levels (i.e., "manipulation", "decoration" and "tokenism") in Hart's "ladder of participation" (Shier, 2001, p. 110). Similar to Hart, Shier's model is also hierarchical indicating the most ideal level of participation. Furthermore, Shier elaborated on the processes and conditions entailed in the higher levels of the ladder which were deemed as real forms of participation.

Shier's model is two dimensional describing the degree of roles children perform in decision-making processes and, on the hand, the extent to which adults engage or support children who participate. The model entails five hierarchical levels of participation ranging from "children are listened to" as the first level to "children share power and responsibility for decision-making" as the fifth and highest level. In each level, three stages of adult commitment were indicated, namely, "opening" to refer to the "personal commitment" or "statement of intent" of adults, "opportunity" to refer to the resources, skills and knowledge adults provide to support children, and "obligation" to indicate the existence of organizational/institutional policies ensuring children's participation (Shier, 2001, p. 110).

As an alternative to two previous models, Lansdown (2001) provided three broad approaches to children's participation. These approaches according to Lansdown (2001) are not mutually exclusive and that the boundaries of these approaches are not clear cut. This could also mean that the categories could be viewed as a continuum from which one organization could adopt an approach that could be a permutation of two approaches rather than a hierarchical set of categories where preference for the highest level is implicit. On the other hand, these approaches are flexible allowing the program proponents and children to define the modalities of engagement and support in the program implementation.

The three approaches conceptualized by Lansdown (2001) are as follows: consultative processes, participative initiatives and promoting self-advocacy. Consultative processes are usually adult initiated, led and managed. Children do not have any control over the outcomes. According to Lansdown (2001) this approach seeks not change the structural relations between adults and children. However, it involves "a recognition by adults in positions of power of the validity of children's experience, that it can and does differ from the experiences of adults and that it needs to inform decision-making processes" (Lansdown, 2001, p. 17). The intention of this approach is "to find out about children's experiences, views and concerns in order that legislation, policies or services can be better informed" (Lansdown, 2001, p. 16). The consultative processes could be conducted at various levels ranging from the community up to the international levels. They could take

place in the form of a single activity, part of a sustained activity, or part of a long-term or permanent structure.

Participative initiatives are also initiated by adults but have a sense of collaboration with children. They involve the creation of structures whereby children can influence outcomes and that children could eventually take self-directed actions once the project is underway (Lansdown, 2001, p. 21). The intention of this approach is “to strengthen the processes of democracy, create opportunities for children to understand and apply democratic principles or involve children in the development of services and policies that impact on them” (Lansdown, 2001, p. 16).

According to Lansdown (2001), projects that begin as consultative processes move forward to becoming participative initiatives as adults explore new ways of working together. An example cited under this approach include research projects involving children in the design of the research agenda and in the conduct of data gathering on issues affecting lives of children themselves.

The third approach proposed by Lansdown (2001) is promoting self-advocacy. The overall aim of this approach is “to empower children to identify and fulfil their own goals and initiatives” (Lansdown, 2001, p. 16). Compared to the two previous approaches, children take the lead in identifying issues of concerns and strategies that would be implemented. The role of adults is to facilitate and support the processes decided upon by children, taking up the roles as advisers, supporters, administrators and fund-raisers (Lansdown, 2001, p. 27). Adults play a significant role in this approach whereby they should concede the power to children to control the process and outcome. An example cited by Lansdown (2001) is the support for the creation and sustainability of operations of children's clubs and organizations.

Compared with the framework of Hart and Shier, the three approaches of Lansdown (2001) do not give any valuation of one approach over the other. In another sense, it is non-hierarchical. One limitation however is that Lansdown did not provide a set of criteria which could guide organizations or agencies in choosing the appropriate approach given the capacities of the organization, the dynamics of the issue that would be addressed and the capacity of children to engage with. Although viewed as a limitation, the researcher could also view such gap as an opportunity for flexibility for organizations to design an appropriate approach. According to Lansdown (2001), there are no blue prints to effective participation of children because these could deny the opportunity of children to be involved in the design and development of the process itself.

Child participation can also be understood by the way the process involving children is valued or the meanings attached to these. Child participation can be understood in terms of its value in bringing about changes to children. Two approaches to children's

participation were conceptualized by Theis (2007), namely, the utilitarian approach and the transformative approach.

Existing literature on different initiatives and projects relevant to child participation are replete. Theis (2007), however, cautioned that one-off events and project-specific participation dominated experiences in the region. He further criticized that many initiatives were led and driven by international organizations and governments in order to improve the quality of decisions and services for children. Moreover, he commented that such initiatives are lacking in terms of bringing fundamental changes in children's social roles and power positions in the family, community and larger society. Theis proposed two approaches to children's participation, namely, the utilitarian approach and the transformative approach. The utilitarian approach "focuses on children as resources, on children's contributions and service, and on children's responsibilities" (Theis, 2007, p. 3). In such an approach children do not have decision-making power nor do they challenge existing hierarchies and power relations with adults (Theis, 2007). On the other hand, the transformative approach views "children's participation as a process of social change in the relation between children and adults" (Theis, 2007, p. 3). Such an approach is critical because it aims to accelerate the power position of children as social agents, enables them to make decisions and challenge the power dynamics they experience with adults.

4. Children's Participation Within ASEAN

All countries in ASEAN have ratified the UN CRC, and given this all governments are expected to comply with all the principles and provisions including the right to participation. A closer look on the status of reservations made on the Convention, the views of governments towards the said right, and the approaches done to realize such right reveals some challenges.

Malaysia expressed reservations on Articles 13 and 15 and declared that the provisions will only be applied in conformity with the country's Constitution, national laws and national policies (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). Certainly, issuing such reservations does not recognize the right of the child to express his/her views and undertake forms of protest against the State.

Singapore, on the other hand, has issued reservations on Articles 12, 13, 15 and 17 and has invoked the authority of the parents, schools and other persons entrusted with the care of the child in determining the child's best interest (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). In addition, the country's customs, values and religions in a multi-cultural context has to be complied with in implementing the aforementioned articles in the Convention (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). This implies that views of children towards the government and towards society have to be mediated by existing political, social and cultural institutions to which they do not have access to and control. Such reservations

have also reinforced the notion that adults are the final arbiter in the interpretation of rights for children.

Brunei Darussalam made a blanket reservation on the CRC which also includes provisions on child participation. The government explained that its reservations apply to Convention's provisions that may be contrary to its Constitution, and to the beliefs and principles of Islam, religion and the state (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). Notwithstanding, the government reported that activities encouraging children to express their views have been organized within schools and different levels of society (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003a). Some constraints towards recognition of children's participation are the lack of laws that provides for freedom of expression, and that tradition and culture that gives due importance on respect for elders and primacy of parents' decisions (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003a).

Thailand did not issue reservations on the provisions relevant to children's participation. However, the government issued a reservation on Article 22 of the CRC, which concerns the rights of refugee children, and this imposes restrictions in enabling the participation of refugee and asylum-seeking children. Moreover, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2012b, p. 8) expressed a concern "that not all children have the opportunity to express their views freely and participate in the decisions that affect them in the home, community, and administrative and judicial procedures, partly due to traditional attitudes".

Myanmar does not have reservations on the CRC and that the government reported that its national Child Law allows children to express their views and to have their explanations listened to and respected (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011b). However, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2012a, p. 8) expressed concern that "traditional attitudes towards children in society limit respect for their views and that the State party has not taken sufficient measures to ensure that the views of the child are given due consideration, especially in courts, schools... within the family, other institutions and society at large."

Indonesia initially issued reservations on Article 17 of the CRC but these were withdrawn in February 2005 (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). Despite this, Indonesia faces constraints with regard to realizing children's right to participation due to the paternalistic and feudal culture that persists in its society (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003b).

Cambodia did not issue a reservation on the CRC. With regards to children's participation, the government reported that its Constitution stipulated that Khmer citizens, including children, have the right to freely express their views (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2010b). Moreover, the government reported to have organized platforms and

events to provide opportunities for children to express and to participate in decision-making, and have included children's views in governmental plans of actions on children (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2010b).

Philippines did not issue any reservation when it ratified the CRC. With regard to children's participation, the government's report to the UN stated that "beyond all these spaces and opportunities...already in place there is still the deeper challenges of... changing society's values, attitudes and norms which still tend to promote conformity and therefore discourage independent and critical thinking and decision-making..." (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009b, p. 39).

Lao People's Democratic Republic did not issue any reservation on the CRC. In its report to the UN, the government said that its Constitution provides its citizens, including children, freedoms in both oral and written expressions that are not contrary to the law (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2010a). Some examples of measures cited by the government were existence of children and youth organizations, opportunities for children to air views to school managements, and using media to inform parents about children's rights (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2010a). However, the government reported that challenges remain, including the lack of sufficient resources to promote the children's participation among public officials and personnel such as judges, police and probation officers, teachers and public health workers (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2010a).

Viet Nam did not issue any reservation on the CRC. The government reported to the UN that laws that recognize and allow children's participation exist, however, society's views and expectations of children's role pose challenges (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011c). Another challenge cited by government was the low level of awareness and knowledge of some leaders at different levels, of parents and child care workers on child participation, and the low level of commitment in creating conditions and expectations to enable children to exercise their right (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011c).

The reservations made by and the challenges expressed by governments manifest a cultural construction of children as dependent on adults, as social actors whose agency is yet to be developed and who are at a disadvantage in terms of power position vis-a-vis adults. As West (2007, p. 126) pointed out, children in Southeast Asia are perceived to be "white cloths or blank sheets to be inscribed upon, or empty vessels waiting to be filled".

Despite these challenges, ASEAN has taken strides in recognizing the child's right to participation. Firstly, ASEAN states recognize that children have the right to participate and this is recognized in its 2001 Declaration on the Commitments for Children in ASEAN whereby governments committed to "[c]reate opportunities for children and young people to express views, advocate their rights and concerns, and participate in

community development” (Declaration on the Commitments for Children in ASEAN, 2001). Such commitment was then further sustained by creating institutionalized spaces for children to participate directly in influencing ASEAN’s strategies and plans of action.

The ASEAN Children’s Forum is considered as the institutionalized space for children’s participation in ASEAN. It was conceived out of a strong recommendation of Southeast Asian children to have a forum that will be the “regional voice of children”, “will work to address children’s concerns with a regional perspective”, and “will also encourage governments to develop national frameworks on children’s participation and create policies that promote children’s rights” (First Southeast Asia Children’s Conference Declaration: Towards one caring and sharing community for children, 2006).

Prior to the first ASEAN Children’s Forum, the Philippine government took the initiative to convene the First Southeast Asia Children’s Conference last 10 to 14 December 2006 (ASEAN, 2011). It was participated in by children from ASEAN member countries who discussed themes that were deemed as important to children and youth (ASEAN, 2011). The issues discussed were on poverty, disasters and emergencies, education, HIV/AIDS and other diseases, maternal health, child mortality, gender equality, environmental sustainability, children’s participation and child trafficking (First Southeast Asia Children’s Conference Declaration: Towards one caring and sharing community for children, 2006). The said children’s conference in 2006 served as a platform to decide on creating an institutionalized mechanism for children’s participation in ASEAN.

The terms of reference of the ASEAN Children’s Forum, which was adopted during the Preparatory Senior Officials Meeting for 7th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting for Social Welfare and Development (AMMSWD) held last November 2010, calls for the institutionalization of the ACF as a formal children’s process within ASEAN. The said document considers the ACF as a venue for children to participate in ASEAN community building, to express views and aspirations, and to cooperate together towards regional development. Moreover, the document stipulates that the ACF shall be a biennial venue for children from ASEAN member states to “[a]dvocate children’s rights in the region” and “to participate in the ASEAN Community building by 2015” (ASEAN, 2011, pp. 3-4).

In a press release issued by the Singaporean government during the 2012 ASEAN Children’s Forum, the Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports was quoted as saying, “The Forum is a significant platform for the discussion of children issues in the region...provides an opportunity for ASEAN children and youth to not only discuss matters close to their hearts, but also to work together... [and] [i]t also gives ASEAN countries an opportunity to hear from our children and youth, who will be our leaders tomorrow” (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, and Singapore Children’s Society, 2012).

The modalities of the ACF are as follows. The ACF is joined by children aged 12 to 18 who were nominated by their respective governments “through existing national children’s conferences or other appropriate national processes that will ensure wider representation of children” (ASEAN, 2011, p. 4). The terms of reference encourage inclusion by ensuring gender equality among the delegates and by providing opportunities for children with special needs to participate.

As a venue for deliberation, each delegate has the responsibility to be informed about the issues prior to the forum, to actively participate in the discussions, to disseminate information and outcomes of the forum and carry-out follow up actions relevant to the ACF’s recommendations. Similar to the decision-making practice in ASEAN, the ACF shall decide “based on consensus” although the TOR recognize and encourage “freedom of children to give suggestions” (ASEAN, 2011, p. 5).

The outcomes or recommendations made by the ACF shall be disseminated within ASEAN and to the member states. Based on the terms of reference, representatives of the children delegates will present the forum outcomes to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (AMMSWD) through the Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD), which may be convened during the same year. But in case the SOMSWD will be convened at a later year, the representatives of the children delegates will still be presenting the outcomes during and prior to it they are also expected to have an opportunity to present it to the AMMSWD ministers in their respective countries. On the other hand, the ASEAN Secretariat is expected to support the dissemination of the outcomes to other ASEAN sectoral bodies such as the Senior Officials Meeting on Youth (SOMY), ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) and the ASEAN Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC).

There have already been three ACFs that have taken place. The first was in 2010 held in the Philippines which led to the formulation of the ACF TOR. The second was in 2012 hosted by the government of Singapore. The 2012 ACF was followed-up by the dialogue between selected children representatives from the ACF and the ACWC. Moreover, the third was hosted by the Thai government. These processes are expected to adopt documents drafted and framed by children themselves.

The 2010 ACF was organized by the Council for the Welfare of Children, a policy-development body of the Philippine government. It took place last 19 to 23 October 2010 and did involve around 32 children from ASEAN countries including children with special needs. Being the first ACF, it was deemed as significant because it was the venue where children adopted the Terms of Reference of the ACF and ways to better involve adults and organizations in supporting children’s participation (Council for the Welfare of Children, 2012; Travis, n.d.).

The 2012 ACF was held from 6 to June 2012 involving around 36 young delegates from ten ASEAN member states (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, and Singapore Children's Society, 2012). It was organized by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and the Singapore Children's Society, and carried the theme "Empowering children by promoting their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)" (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, and Singapore Children's Society, 2012).

The 2012 ACF was given a follow-up through the dialogue between selected children representatives from the ACF and the ACWC. The dialogue between the children representatives who participated in the 2012 ACF and the representatives of the ACWC took place in Jakarta last 4 July 2012 (ASEAN, 2012a). During the dialogue, the participants shared the outcomes of the recommendations generated during the ACF and issued a reminder to the ACWC members saying, "Don't speak about us without us!" (ASEAN, 2012a).

The ACF is indeed advantageous to children for various reasons. First, it has institutionalized children's participation within the ASEAN decision-making process. The ACF is recognized as a space created by children, participated in by children and intended for the protection and promotion of the rights of children. Second, the ACF has provided an avenue through which children's issues can be generated, deliberated and translated into specific recommendations and proposals to other ASEAN bodies. Third, it has become an instrument to voice out children's priorities and recommendations to other ASEAN bodies; the resulting decisions in the ACF were directly articulated by children to other ASEAN bodies. The results of the 2010 ACF including the proposed terms of reference were presented during the 7th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (AMMSWD). The results of the 2012 ACF were presented during the 5th meeting of the ACWC.

One of the key outcomes of the ACF is the resulting integration of children's participation as a priority in the ACWC's work program. The work plan of the ACWC for the period of 2012 to 2016 indicated "the right of children to participate in affairs that affect them" as one of the priority thematic agenda. In particular the strategy is to "create an enabling environment for children to participate in decision making process". Moreover the said work plan noted that ACWC representatives will attend the ACF and that children will also be invited to attend the ACWC meetings.

5. Structural Weaknesses of the ASEAN Children's Forum

The ACF is structured as a participatory and consultative space for children. It has a value in terms of allowing children to identify and deliberate on the issues they confront at the national and regional levels and have these issues articulated to higher bodies within ASEAN. However, the process itself has weaknesses.

In examining the ACF, the views of Dryzek (2000 cited in O'Toole and Gale, 2008) on the necessary elements of democratic practices shall be used. It is important to note that the essence of children's participation effectively contributes to the process of discussion, sharing and making decisions affecting one's life and that of the community. This is also the same rationale that democracy has. In fact, Hart (1992) pointed out that participation is the means through which democracies are built and also serves as a standard through which democracies are measured.

O'Toole and Gale (2008) used the views of Dryzek (2000) in determining ways whereby democratic processes can be measured. The three elements were provided, namely, 1) extension of franchise determined by groups involved in any decision-making process, 2) scope of democracy determined by the range of issues covered, capacity to set the agenda and roles performed in decision-making processes, and 3) democratic authenticity determined by the extent of participation and control of agents in a decision making process (O'Toole & Gale, 2008).

One of the weaknesses of the ACF is the limited opportunities it has provided for children's participation. One of the reasons why the ACF is non-inclusive is due to its problematic selection process. The terms of reference of the ACF said that the selection of participants shall be based on internal guidelines and processes of sending governments. This led to varying methods undertaken by governments such as by holding elections amongst children and appointing children delegates who are involved in NGO's or government programs. Despite guarantees of gender balance and participation of children with disabilities in the ACF's terms of reference, the way the participants are selected is still subject to adult control and permission. On the other hand, the selection process is also mediated by the political, social and cultural structures at the domestic level that may not even be in favor of children's right to participation. This displaces a wide number whose identities are maligned or unrecognized (e.g, Rohingya, stateless and gender diverse children) or whose political views run counter with that of the state.

The problem of being less inclusive is not limited to the ACF itself. Several participatory processes involving children also face similar constraints. Protacio-De Castro et al. (2007) cited that socio-economic and geographic locations of children hinder their participation. They articulated the difficulty to reach out to children who are poor, live in remote areas, differently-abled and who are out of school.

While being a participatory process, children are not necessarily in control of the agenda-setting behind the ACF. Interestingly the ACF has taken a broad range of issues including violence against children and HIV/AIDS which do affect children. But there is a lack of clarity how priority issues were determined but what is apparent is that the agenda are determined by ASEAN itself in consultation with the host government.

Whether the ACF manifests democratic authenticity is worth examining. The ACF is clearly a consultative process whereby children articulate their issues, deliberate what should be considered as regional concerns, in particular those that are common across children within ASEAN and generate recommendations. As a consultative process, there is no guarantee that the recommendations of children would eventually translate into policies and programs that governments and ASEAN would adopt. The ACF falls short by only guaranteeing that the recommendations made by children will be articulated and considered by adult-only bodies such as the ACWC.

On the other hand, the ACF and its related processes only translate into two things—a set of recommendations accepted by children participants and a process of voicing these to adult officials. The ACF does not guarantee how the recommendations will be disseminated to a wider audience of children at the national or local levels or how the process itself can contribute to the empowering of children and/or their groups to work towards social change. In fact, the ACF has made itself detached from other processes involving children even at the regional level. This renders the ACF as just a symbolic process that is detached from a wide spectrum of activities that are closer to children's lived realities and that allow children to make sense about their world and to allow their rights be realized.

As a way to illustrate such analysis, the report of Regional Workshop to Promote and Support Children and Young People's Participation in ASEAN: Making our ASEAN meaningful for Children and Young People noted that a group of children from different children's groups in Southeast Asia was convened during a parallel workshop to the ASEAN Children's Forum 2010. The said parallel workshop carried the theme, "Making our ASEAN Meaningful for Children and Young People". One of the decisions during the said workshop was to request for an interface with the official delegates to the ACF, but this was declined by the ASEAN and in particular the Philippine government. The children in their letter addressed to the Department of Social Welfare and Development of the Philippines expressed their "regret foregoing meeting the delegates from [sic] the ASEAN Children's Forum" and expressed "a more meaningful and active collaboration between the children of ASEAN" (Regional Workshop to Promote and Support Children and Young People's Participation in ASEAN: Making our ASEAN meaningful for Children and Young People, 2010, p. 35).

These weaknesses are not exclusive to the ACF but also manifest in various participatory processes involving children. Percy-Smith (2010) has criticized participatory processes as being too focused on children expressing a view rather than being involved in all aspects of planning, decision-making and implementation. Percy-Smith (2010) also talked about tensions between adult organizational agenda and the priorities of children leaving children with no choice but to focus deliberations of an issue or agenda that have been pre-set. Moreover, Percy-Smith (2010) cited that consultative processes restrict children's

empowerment by focusing too much on children's articulation of concerns and less on their capacity to directly work on ways to improve their lives. Furthermore, Percy-Smith (2010, p. 112) expressed that participation in governmental decision-making "breeds a culture of dependency on professionals that mediates against active participation and empowerment of children and community members as authors of their own lives".

6. Re-imagining Child Participation Within the ASEAN

Processes and mechanisms relevant to children's participation should continuously be revised and re-imagined to maximize their potential as a venue to realize the rights of children and to empower them. This section provides some ideas towards that end.

6.1 Towards a Pluralistic Political Space

There is a plethora of opportunities for children to engage in the public sphere ranging from consultations to involvement in decision-making mechanisms. However, these mechanisms located in the public spheres provide some limitations to children such as access to these spaces, language barrier, and the openness of these spaces to the capacities of children.

Moreover, these processes where children are involved are rarely within the realms of their everyday life but situated and limited to the confines within the public/official sphere. Theis (2007) argued that initiatives that are close to the everyday lives of children such as schools, communities are likely to be sustainable. This problematic point is reflective of the ACF wherein there are no points of connection between the issues and recommendations put forward by the official children representatives and the daily realities of children at the local level. One may argue that the issues and recommendations have been developed through consultative processes at the domestic level. But connections between the national/local and regional should not be limited to preparatory consultative processes but also in terms of the outcomes of regional deliberations reinforcing or supporting the processes back home.

Having a pluralistic political space for children in ASEAN recognizes that the ACF is not the only opportunity to children to affect decision-making processes at the regional level, but acknowledges other spaces of engagement operating at various levels. These would include civil society led initiatives such as children's meetings, consultations and campaigns operating at the local, national and regional levels. The point is not to aggregate and diffuse children's voices and perspectives into priority issues fed into only one recognized children's process, i.e. the ACF, but for ASEAN to open itself and reach out to a variety of deliberative processes and taking those voices into consideration.

Cockburn (2007, p. 454) argued for a "radically pluralistic public arena where political spaces are able to change in order to accommodate the everyday worlds of children and

other marginalized groups". He also argued that children should not be the one who change and suit themselves but rather the surroundings must suit them. Such can be done by accommodating and valuing a variety of voices, discursive practices and languages.

6.2 Enhancing Inclusivity

Many literature have pointed out on the value of inclusion as one vital element of democratic processes (Held, 2000; Young, 2000; Cockburn, 2007; O'Toole and Gale, 2008). An inclusive process is deemed as one legitimating factor behind any decision-making process and its corresponding outcome (Young, 2000 cited in Thomas, 2007). An inclusive process is considered as a form of effective participation to allow citizens to have a "real possibility" to influence the decision (Falbo, 2006, p. 255).

Re-imagining an inclusive political space in ASEAN where children can engage entails two aspects. First is an inclusive political space that recognizes and provides access to a variety of children who come from marginalized identities or subjectivities. Second is an inclusive political space where children's discursive capacities are recognized and valued.

A starting point towards inclusivity is a recognition of children's specific differences and otherness as a group. As Will and Dar (2011, p. 601) pointed out, "political participation will truly include children only insofar as it involves the ability to transform entrenched structures of power through children's particular lived experiences of difference".

Children are not a homogenous group but rather a plurality of subjective experiences, social positions and identities. These differences need to be checked because there are underlying power dynamics that if not checked can reinforce exclusion. For example, the issue of patriarchy and heterosexism which manifest in various ASEAN countries can reinforce marginalization of children on the basis of their diverse gender expressions.

On the other hand, ensuring children's participation needs to recognize and address their marginalized position vis-a-vis adults. Moreover, while children engage in deliberations together with adults they are not treated as equally positioned participants. The reservations of ASEAN countries citing culture and tradition manifests a common view that children are less capable as agents, cannot make decisions themselves, and should be in the guidance of adults.

Another aspect of inclusion is in the realm of political communication. Going beyond being physically present and visible or what Falbo (2006, p. 252) calls "politics of presence", political actors such as children engaging in decision-making processes should also have an opportunity to influence the outcomes. Drexler (2007, p. 3) citing political theorist Iris Marion Young pointed out that "[t]he normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes". However,

Cockburn (2007, p. 447) pointed out that “obstructed forms of communication” marked by a preference towards an adult-oriented method and language used in argumentation and deliberation still manifest and pose as barriers to children.

Making political communication inclusive necessitates the altering of a political culture wherein argumentative modes of reasoning are supplemented by other modes of communication such as greeting, rhetoric and narratives and the diverse ways these can be articulated (Young, 1990 cited in Held, 2006, p. 244). Thomas (2007) elaborated on Iris Marion Young’s concept of inclusive political communication by describing the other modes of communication such as Young’s concept of “greeting”, “rhetoric” and “narrative”. Greeting or “public acknowledgement” refers to “communicative political gestures through which those who have conflicts aim to solve problems, recognize each other as included in the discussion, especially those with whom they differ in opinion, interest, or social location” (Young, 2000 cited in Thomas, 2007, p. 211). Rhetoric was considered as “the various ways in which something can be said, which color and condition its substantive content” and would include emotional tone, use of figures of speech and non-verbal and symbolic gestures (Young, 2000 cited in Thomas, 2007, p. 211). Moreover, narrative or otherwise considered as “situated knowledge” are considered essential to enable groups to understand the experiences of others and develop a shared discourse (Young, 2000 cited in Thomas, 2007, p. 211).

Recognizing and valuing such diverse forms of communication are necessary in order to bring to light and disclose experiences of marginalized groups that are usually excluded or which go unnoticed.

Another aspect of inclusion that may need to be considered entails “the widening of issues that could be the object of deliberation” (Falbo, 2006, p. 253). Such was deemed by Falbo (2006, p. 253) as crucial because it “refers to those inputs that could be included in the deliberative arena, despite the application of mechanisms and procedures to enhance the active participation of disadvantaged groups”. Such concept is necessary to counterbalance the role of governments in deciding on the priority issues that will be discussed in the ACF. Such inclusion is also necessary to allow children to bring in critical issues that may not be deemed pleasant by the governments.

6.3 Space that mutually reinforces regional and local concerns

Conceptualizing a space in ASEAN where children engage needs to reframe our understanding of children not only as political actors at the domestic level but also at a regional level. There is a need to reframe our understanding of children as “transnational” actors “straddling geographical and ideational boundaries in a notional network that is seen to exist above or beyond the state” (Gilson, 2011, p. 289), or what Tarrow (2010, p. 172) considers as “rooted cosmopolitan”. The term “rooted cosmopolitan” coined by anthropologist Ulf Hannerz who defined it as “...interspersed among the most committed

nationals, in patterns not always equally transparent, are a growing number of people of more varying experiences and connections[,]...[who] redefine the nation... others again are in the nation but not part of it" (Hannerz, 1996 cited in Tarrow, 2010, p. 172). Tarrow (2010, p. 172) further noted that "rooted cosmopolitans" may express allegiance to an imagined international community.

In such case, children are imagined as actors whose interactions are not limited within the confines of the geography of community or state but also in institutions and spaces beyond the state. There have been experiences of children worldwide who have engaged in processes at the transnational level including the ACF itself.

In re-imagining a space that mutually reinforces regional and local concerns, I wish to borrow Sidney Tarrow's concept of "loose coupling" to help us understand how international and domestic politics interact and at times intersect (Tarrow, 2010, p. 174). Such concept was thought of as the "emergence of mechanisms and processes that bridge domestic and international politics in a sustained way without displacing one or the other or homogenizing the two" (Tarrow, 2010, p. 174). The processes of interaction and intersection between the domestic and international were categorized into four types, namely, internalization, externalization, insider/outsider coalition formation and transnationalization (Tarrow, 2010).

Internalization conceived as "construction of campaigns of local or national non-state action constructed around external issues" occurs at the domestic level (Tarrow, 2010, p. 174). It is characteristic of processes where actors "reframe claims in terms of universal human rights rather than particular citizenship rights" (Tsutsui and Shin 2009, cited in Tarrow, 2010, p. 175). Such internalization can happen when the outcomes of the ACF are disseminated by children at the domestic level and used by children, or even together with child rights activists, as points to influence policy outcomes of the state. Internalization can also happen when children who have been involved in regional spaces are able to support the capacities of their peers to take collective action addressing issues they face.

Reflecting on the experiences of children members of Caring Teens Community, an Indonesian children's organization involved in regional level meetings, Diena Haryana, a child rights activist, pointed out that children's exposure to regional discussions have resulted in efforts to discuss amongst themselves issues such as bullying and violence, share with each other ways by which other children have dealt with the issue, and develop their own solutions to the problem (Haryana, 2014, pers. comm., 5 September).

Externalization conceived as "the employment of political opportunities provided by international institutions, regimes, or treaties for external political action" occurs at the international level (Tarrow, 2010, p. 174). Processes under this type usually occur when domestic actors engage international institutions such as international human rights courts and other intergovernmental bodies. An example given by Tarrow (2010) is the

Women's NGO Forum during the 1995 Beijing UN conference on women. Indeed, the ACF itself is a process of externalization where children representatives bring and articulate domestic issues and engage in deliberation to make such as regional priorities worthy for ASEAN's action.

At the UN level, children have likewise affected decisions of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child by submitting their alternative reports and conducting dialogues with the committee members. Reflecting on the experiences of Kids Dream, a children's organization from Hong Kong, Billy Wong, a child rights advocate, shared good outcomes resulting from children's involvement in the CRC reporting process. She said that "the UN Committee now also have new guidelines for children in participating in the reporting process...[and] they now allow submission of reports in different formats" (Wong, 2014, pers. comm., 10 September).

Transnationalization pertains to "the cooperation of domestic actors when they work together across national boundaries" and "with common aims"; it occurs at the international level (Tarrow, 2010, p. 175). Tarrow said that there are limited examples of such processes which she considered as difficult to organize and to sustain. At the ASEAN level, transnational actions occurred during the ASEAN civil society meetings that despite the multiplicity of issues carried by a diverse range of activist groups produced a common call to ensure and strengthen civil society participation within ASEAN decision-making. Indeed there have been experiences whereby children engaged in the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF) from 2011 to 2014 resulting to children's statements integrated into the forum's outcome documents. There were also civil society initiatives to bring together several children's groups around Asia to discuss their issues, learn from each other's experiences and discuss plans for the region. These processes need be considered as alternative transnational political spaces for ASEAN children.

The involvement of children in regional meetings generated positive outcomes towards children. Billy Wong shared that "through regional children's meetings, child participants learnt more skills and knowledge on child rights advocacy that help them continue [to] advocate children's rights in their home countries...these experiences were shared with their peers when they went back to their home countries" (Wong, 2014, pers. comm., 10 September). Diena Haryana, on the other hand, shared that children's involvement in regional processes "broaden their perspectives of what happen[s] to children in other parts of the world, and that they can share with each other that they can do something meaningful to help other children around them" (Haryana, 2014, pers. comm., 5 September). Indeed, engaging in transnationalization potentially opens spaces to cultivate a sense of solidarity among children across different spheres or levels where they engage.

The last process at the transnational level which can potentially be engaged by children is the formation of insider/outsider coalitions, a term borrowed by Tarrow from Sikkink

(2005). Such process happens when both international and domestic opportunities are open for domestic activists to engage, and that domestic activists “privilege domestic political opportunities but will keep international activism as a complementary and compensatory option” (Sikkink, 2005 cited in Tarrow, 2010, p. 179). This process somehow maximizes both international institutions and domestic power structures as sites towards change. Forming insider/outsider coalitions is vital considering that not all children are enabled to directly participate in processes beyond the state due to a host of barriers such as resource constraints, immigration issues and geographic barriers. For example, street children may not be given a capacity to represent a children’s organization in an ASEAN fora. Moreover, even if children were able to speak in international gatherings, their recommendations may not automatically translate into concrete actions by the state. Hence, a dual pronged approach of participation is vital engaging various nodes of power and leveraging on one to strengthen the push on another. Such should be the ideal scenario where children at the local level influence the outcomes of the ACF and in other ASEAN mechanisms and where they get to use the decisions of ASEAN to call for stronger policy and programmatic outcomes by their respective state. Such would be an ideal scenario where children from one state in ASEAN facing human rights violations are supported to engage with children’s groups from other countries in the region to create solidarity and collectively call for enhanced action by the concerned state.

7. Conclusion

This paper albeit critical to the ASEAN Children’s Forum does not propose its abolition. Looking at the various spaces where children can participate both at the national and regional levels, the ACF can still play an important role by being a site for interaction amongst children, a site for deliberation of issues and as a platform for children to advocate for their issues within ASEAN. But considering the ASEAN Children Forum as the only regional space for children can be problematic due to issues of inclusion and being detached from the contexts of children. Exploring and expanding spaces for children’s participation within ASEAN is needed to allow more children to act as agents, within their own immediate environments.

Reimagining children’s participation in ASEAN would necessitate the recognition of, and making accessible the multiplicity of spaces for children. For one, such space should be characterized by the plurality in terms of form and inclusion recognizing the diversity of children’s identities and subjective experiences. Moreover, these spaces located within and beyond children’s immediate contexts need to mutually reinforce each other, leveraging on each other’s potential to create positive changes for children.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written with support and encouragement from my colleagues in civil society and the academe. My sincere appreciation goes to my colleagues in the Department of International Studies of Miriam College for providing both substantive and technical advice. Credit is given to Diena Haryana of Yayasan SEJIWA and Billy Wong of the Hong Kong Committee for Child Rights for sharing their experience. To the several children and young people who have meaningfully exercised their active citizenship to make ASEAN more inclusive, this paper is dedicated to you.

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