

REDIM: Promoting Civic Participation of Marginalized Groups

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Abstract

The article examines adult-centrism as a cause that prevents children and youth from exercising full citizenship. It further discusses the role of young people's participation in solving complex social problems. It details the approach proposed by the Network for the Rights of Children in Mexico (REDIM), based on the principle of 'human equality'. In this, people are deemed of equal value while recognizing that diversity requires differentiated conditions for participation. A new search protocol for forced disappearance of children and youth, which was promoted by REDIM in Mexico, is analyzed. It highlights young people's contributions to improving success in finding victims quickly. This case confirms that enabling the participation of diverse stakeholders—especially those most affected by the problem—leads to more relevant, innovative, and effective solutions. At the same time, it shows that diversity is not sufficient; achieving authentic inclusion requires challenging cultural frameworks, creating enabling conditions to encourage full participation, translating across perspectives, and investing in long-term collaboration with different stakeholders.

Introduction

Solving complex social problems requires active participation from the people closest to the issue. This ensures that their interests and perspectives are accounted for in decisions that affect them. However, promoting participation requires acknowledging and addressing structural barriers that prevent all people from engaging equally. Participation channels must be designed according to the needs of the people for which they are intended. For children and youth, this entails questioning cultural norms and institutional structures that tend to exclude them on the basis of age. Decision-makers can adapt processes to their unique situations and capacities to empower them to get involved.

REDIM's experience engaging young people to tackle problems in their community offers useful lessons for extending full citizenship to other historically marginalized and vulnerable groups. By creating equitable conditions for participation, more diverse voices will contribute to finding solutions.

Adult-centrism as Systemic Barrier to Youth Participation

Due to structural inequalities, people's ability to fully exercise their citizenship is determined by personal characteristics such as age and sex. For children and youth, a critical barrier to participating in civic processes is adult-centrism. This refers to the tendency of viewing adults' perspective as superior to that of young people, leading to biases in understanding and relating with them.ⁱ This stance can be seen in children and youth's exclusion from politics, such that laws and policies that concern them are approved often without even consulting them.

In the prevailing understanding of the State, (male) adult citizens concentrate power through structures differentiated by sex and age within the family and the government.ⁱⁱ These structures are consolidated through upbringing and laws that assign specific, yet not equal, roles for different social groups. Therefore, children and youth tend to be represented as only partial citizens; dependent and with fewer capacities, unable to demand their own rights. They are not valued on equal terms as adults. A democracy structured around hierarchies of age creates social, economic, and political inequalities that become the main obstacle to guaranteeing the rights of children and youth.

While adult-centrism is a root cause of young people's unequal access to citizenship, it can also be the source of the solution. As gatekeepers, adults have the power to change this system by recognizing the value of children and youth's perspectives, needs, and contributions. Further, adults can adapt different participation processes to make them accessible for children. Additionally, they can share spaces of power, challenge adult-centric norms, build public support for their citizenship, foster leadership, and promote dialogue for intergenerational justice.

REDIM's Approach to Forced Disappearances of Children and Adolescents

[The Network for the Rights of Children in Mexico](#) (REDIM, from its Spanish acronym) seeks to transform adult-centric social norms, values, and power structures. To achieve this, they promote the participation of children and youth in high-level decision-making and policy development. Their approach is based on the principle of 'human equivalence' (or human equality) proposed by feminist scholar Marcela Lagardeⁱⁱⁱ. This principle posits that, beyond difference and diversity, all people are and have equivalent value as humans, with the same inherent capacity, power, and autonomy. In practice, it means addressing structural inequalities that disadvantage others so that everyone can exercise their rights. Although Lagarde mainly uses human equality in the context of differences between women and men, REDIM shows that it is also relevant when applied to young people and adults.

This principle is a starting point to drive transformative change to build stronger democracies where developing solutions involves those who suffer the problem, regardless of their personal characteristics.

In the case of children and youth, promoting human equality requires transforming how they perceive themselves and, in turn, how adults perceive them. This shift involves creating spaces where they can recognize their differences as something positive and move away from a hierarchical relationship to one of equals. This makes the impact that young people have at home, in their communities, and country more visible and valuable.

REDIM has implemented this approach in Mexico to reform the existing protocol for forced disappearances of children and adolescents. To do so, it developed the Additional Search Protocol, which was enacted in March 2021. The protocol includes a methodology for enabling the participation of children and youth in search response, developed through a coalition of 77 civic organizations and 17 public institutions.

The process to develop the protocol stands out for the critical role played by diverse voices and multi-stakeholder, cross-sector collaboration. Children, adolescents, affected families, civil society, the media, police, and judicial institutions worked together in unprecedented ways.

How REDIM Reframed Responses to Forced Disappearances

Forced disappearances of children and adolescents by trafficking networks have been on the rise in Mexico since 2000.^{iv} However, the adult-centered, siloed, and stigmatizing response from different sectors has acted as a roadblock to addressing the problem. It has impeded the establishment of protection measures that can prevent disappearances or resolve them swiftly to lower the risk of injuries.

When dealing with a case of forced disappearance, the illegal yet common practice by the police was to wait for 48 hours to fill the form required to formalize the report. This was often based on the assumption that it might be a ‘tantrum’, meaning that the child might have run away to draw attention. The press sometimes reinforced this perception by describing the situation as a ‘voluntary disappearance’. These institutional reactions dissuaded public support for activating an urgent search alert, thus lowering the chances of a rescue, and placed the blame on the victim. The lack of appropriate procedures amongst police forces added to the public dismissal of the cases. This deepened the helplessness and powerlessness felt by families and civic organizations that have faced organized crime.

To address these barriers, REDIM created task forces with children and adolescents, especially victims’ siblings. These groups were spaces where young people could voice their thoughts on possible motives that led to the disappearance and places to start the search. REDIM conducted awareness-raising workshops with public servants, police, and local media to teach best practices for handling child disappearance cases, including how to communicate the situation to the public. These workshops helped to establish a common language for institutions and the press that emphasized support for the victim and their family.

Moreover, the organization established communication channels between public institutions and civil society to monitor progress. Encouraging transparency was essential to restore cross sector trust which had been eroded by years of neglect, mismanagement, and corruption. The Additional Protocol's encouraging results are demonstrative that a collaborative response to disappearances – that involves different sectors and meaningfully engages children and youth – can increase the chances of finding the victim alive and unharmed.

Impact

REDIM's success in obtaining government approval and enforcement of the Additional Protocol was the result of sustained pressure from civil society and of a comprehensive approach to the problem. Rather than treating it as a matter meant solely for the police forces, the protocol shows that policymakers, communities, families, and the press have roles to play. The solution included from the start an intergenerational perspective where children and youth can contribute their perspective not only through consultation, but also as active participants at every step of civic processes.

Now that the protocol has been approved, REDIM continues its work as a protector of independent spaces where children and youth can openly discuss issues pertaining to their rights and interests, free of adult-centrism, and organize to take action.

Alongside this work, REDIM focuses on driving a mindset shift among key stakeholders to overcome adult-centric bias. This means the recognition that children and young people's perspectives are equally valuable and that they are capable of exercising their full citizenship. As such, they should be involved in any decisions that impact their lives. Advancing framework change ensures that the gains achieved endure and grow independently, regardless of political cycles, since it creates a broader change in how people think and act. In Mexico, REDIM is currently a seedbed for changemakers who are creating impact in different sectors, whether through civil society, academia, or within the government. It has also given rise to independent organizations led by and for children and youth to demand their rights.

The case of REDIM charts a path for the construction of collaborative solutions where those directly affected are included with a perceptive of human equality rather than with paternalism, so that they feel and are respected, valued, and able to engage meaningfully.

Principles

REDIM's work to achieve full citizenship for children and youth in democratic processes reveals some useful principles for others seeking to place human equality into practice:

1. **Challenge cultural frameworks.** Adult-centrism has historically permeated the structure of representative democracy. It is vital to question and address society's

most deeply rooted beliefs about power, the family, and the government that can become systemic barriers that prevent full participation of all citizens.

2. **Create conditions for authentic inclusion.** While representation and inclusion are intertwined, understanding their difference is essential. Engaging diverse voices is important. However, without authentic inclusion, those voices will not be heard. The difference is reflected in the language we use. Phrases such as ‘inclusive’ or ‘friendly cities for ...’ can reinforce hierarchies by implying that something belongs to those in power and others are only invited in without sharing power. Human equality involves putting the conditions in place to level the playing field, so people feel encouraged and able to fully participate and achieve their potential.
3. **Translate across perspectives.** To achieve the full participation of children and youth, they must be meaningfully involved in the consultation, design, and execution of public policies that affect them. This includes complex issues. Doing this effectively requires defining a methodology to systematize and incorporate their contributions into policy-making. Organizations like REDIM play a critical role here by acting as mediators between young people and adult stakeholders, and can help adults overcome their biases to understand and incorporate children’s perspectives.
4. **Involve diverse voices at different levels and over the long-term.** Achieving human equality requires a mindset shift among authorities, civil society, and families. It also means fostering continuous collaboration between different actors, from the citizen sector (both civic groups and families) to the public and business sectors. However, this is a long-term process. With this in mind, REDIM is building institutional capacity for the future. Rather than only engaging current decision-makers, they train and create leaders in the citizen sector to prepare them to reach positions of leadership later on in their careers.

ⁱ Howe, Robert Brian, and Katherine Covell. *Empowering children: Children's rights education as a pathway to citizenship*. University of Toronto Press, 2005.

ⁱⁱ Tonucci, Francesco, and Mario Merlino. 2004. *La Ciudad De Los Niños*. Madrid: Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lagarde, Marcela. "El derecho humano de las mujeres a una vida libre de violencia." In *Mujeres, globalización y derechos humanos*, pp. 477-534. Cátedra, 2006.

^{iv} Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas. *Registro Nacional De Personas Desaparecidas Y No Localizadas*. 2021. <https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/Index>.