

# MAKING PATHS BY WALKING TOGETHER

## CMCJ CHILDREN FROM VIRUDUNAGAR



Child Participation is a process rather than an event, with varying degrees of involvement - from being consulted on a predetermined issue to children and youth choosing their agenda, making their own decisions and taking them forward. Siva Barathi is a dynamic young leader from Idayankulam village who had been the spark for effective child participation and created a forum of 25 adolescent children and youth from her village to make constructive change in environment and sanitation. She is an active member of CMCJ and learned many aspects of climate change its implication to child rights. The new path she started to walk from her being part of the movement is that she reflected her village environment, her peers in her village against what she learned in the training programs as well part of children led ecological learning centre.

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## **We make Paths by Walking together**

**S**iva Barathi is a dynamic young leader from Idayankulam village who had been the spark for effective child participation and created a forum of 25 adolescent children and youth from her village to make constructive change in environment and sanitation. She is an active member of CMCJ and learned many aspects of climate change its implication to child rights. The constructive part of her being with the movement is that she reflected her village environment, her peers in her village against what she learned in the training programs as well part of children led ecological learning centre. Once she finished her schooling she shifted to college for higher studies but continued to take evening coaching classes for younger children in her own village as volunteer.

Idayankulam is a small village consisting of 64 families – all dalits - located interior in the border of Narikudi and Kariyapatti Blocks of Virudunagar District. Major occupation of this village is agriculture and construction labour. Most of the families doing backyard country chicken rearing at all homes. There is no proper transport facility to access health care centre, High schools & other services. Children have to walk 2-3 kms to access basic child services such as schools and health posts. Mayili is a nearby village to Keel Idayankulam village where the upper caste people is high which at times reflect in dalit children being discriminated and caste conflicts exist.

RCPDS, as Child Centered Development organisation and Resource agency always explore new avenues to ensure children and youth participation. As, renowned resource agency for participatory approaches globally, we facilitated and witnessed participation of children and youth in various forms and arenas such as socio political participation, thematic focus, co-ordinating for child protection, environment protection and climate justice, raising voice for equity issues through advocacy and networking, etc. Thus RCPDS has made community and child participation as its core element in the five years strategic planning which was published in the year 2015.

This Strategic planning document prioritise out efforts through setting clear mile stones and strengthening “Best Practices and challenges” practiced by children in different sectoral areas, mainly to recognise these participatory models as children led and placing children as main promoters. There is an inbuilt system of participatory analysis set for periodical reflection by children themselves using “spider Tool”.

**How do we perceive Child Participation:**

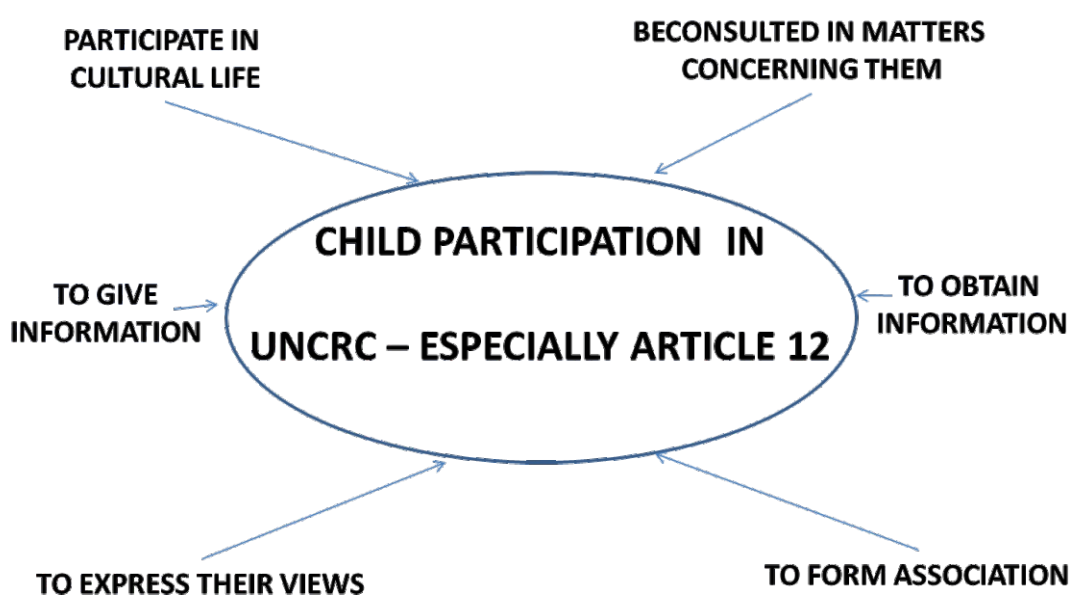
Children's right to participate is established and formally accepted in the UNCRC, 1989. It was the first formal recognition of its kind UNCRC. There is no single, agreed definition of child participation is incorporating specific needs and view of children into decision making process with in the local context and what is possible with available resources including cultural norms, local institutions, etc.

Child Participation is a process rather than an event, with varying degrees of involvement - from being consulted on a predetermined issue to children and youth choosing their agenda, making their own decisions and taking them forward.

Hence child participation in this context is seen by tracking or reviewing the process of children getting involved and at what level - and consultative, collaborative or child-led participation. To ensure the quality of participation this is gauged against some of the basic requirements such as what happens as a result of children participation (i.e) to children themselves, influence of children on their families and community and the way they rationalise and establish their right through the cause.

**The process at Idayankulam - Evolution of the team:**

The whole initiative at Idayankulam is “children-led” in terms of participation. Sivabarathi used to lead and accompany the members of Children Movement for Climate justice – CM CJ from Idayankulam to the Children led Ecological Farming learning Centre located at Shankar Nagar and other training activities including exposures. Having learnt/convinced with the implications of climate change on children and their basic Rights, need for local actions to protect environment, its links to health, etc., she facilitated small group discussions back in her own village with peers. Through series of such meetings, she managed to build a strong team of 20 plus children (both boys and girls) who share and endorse the perspective of Child Rights and Climate Justice.







The first exercise was to understand the available child friendly spaces in the village context by doing a matrix exercise independently with children and adults in the community. Initially to understand the perceptions of children and adults in this community was facilitated by our field staff jointly with Siva Barathi by doing a initial matrix ranking using with few child friendly statements to get children perspective as well how do they rank things. Below are the statements used with children in small group for the matrix exercise.

- ***Adults can make good decisions for us***
- ***I would like to know what is going on around me and my life***
- ***Adults should not pressure me***
- ***I want to get what I want***
- ***To get time to think about various actions/activities***
- ***To be listened to***
- ***To be supported***
- ***To let me have my say***
- ***To be given choices for me to make a decision***
- ***Adults should make every effort to ensure protection to children***

The process of this exercise of matrix ranking is done with children team to get their order of hierarchy and alongside the same is done exclusively with adults and compare both out puts to better understand how children prioritize certain actions and why. This exercise worked particularly well when we worked with group of children and facilitate them to prioritize and reach a consensus in view of an issue or plan. Children were asked to rank the statements from the most important to the least important. (No.1 as most important and 10 as least important) These statements are written in Tamil on a piece of paper and ranked by generating group consensus in the first round. Then it was instructed that any child in the group could move a statement higher or lower in the ranking as long as they could explain the reason for doing so to the rest of the group. Only children moving statements were allowed to talk, enabling them to be listened to by the others. Once the order is completed with second round of consensus and debate the adults are invited to see in what way the arrangement or order of statement is different from their choices.

PERCEPTION MATRIX ON CHILD PARTICIPATION				
RANKING			SCORING	
குழந்தைகள்	பெரியவர்கள்		குழந்தைகள்	பெரியவர்கள்
1	1	என் வாழ்க்கையிலும் என்னை சுற்றிலும் என்ன நடக்கிறது என்பதை அறிந்து கொள்ள வேண்டும்	7	5
2	9	எங்களுக்காக பெரியவர்கள் நல்ல முடிவுகளை எடுக்க முடியும்	10	9
3	8	எனது பாதுகாப்பில் பெரியவர்கள் அதிக அக்கறை செலுத்த வேண்டும்	8	10
4	2	என்னுடைய செயல்பாடுகளுக்கு பெரியவர்கள் ஆதரவாக இருக்கவேண்டும்	7	10
5	3	என்னை குறித்த முக்கிய முடிவுகளை எடுக்க பல்வேறு வாய்ப்புகள் அளிக்க வேண்டும்	7	6
6	7	என்னை குறித்து எந்த முடிவை எடுப்பதற்கும் முன்னால் சிந்திப்பதற்கு நேரம் வேண்டும்	10	9
7	5	என் கருத்தை தெரிவிக்க வாய்ப்பளிக்க வேண்டும்	5	2
8	4	நான் கூறும் கருத்தை மற்றவர்கள் கவனிக்க வேண்டும்	8	7
9	6	எனக்கு என்ன வேண்டுமோ அதை நான் பெற வேண்டும்	6	8
10	10	பெரியவர்கள் எங்களை கட்டாயப்படுத்த கூடாது	7	5



The outcome from this exercise set the base for existing child friendly environment for child participation and then proceeded with three fold action – one : children making plans, using PRA tools for further action and two: Making efforts to iron out the difference identified in the priority ranking of the statements, bridging the gap of perspective and gaining mutual confidence on each other (the squares shown in gray colour); three: community facilitator working with adults to create space and extend support for children implementing their action plan. In this process children are also given the choice to uphold their participatory right even in the larger group or even allowed to remain silent or to take a neutral position.

***Identification of issues related to environment:***

During August 2016 the team decided to undertake a simple village level planning exercise on their own by drawing a village social and resource map on the ground. Then they set of to take a spiral transect walk across the village in four groups to make observations of issues related to environmental sanitation and vulnerable points. On returns the small groups super embossed information from whatever they observed as well whatever they agreed in their group as issue. This was presented to others and the map was finalised. Sivabarathi and one more male member listed all the issues presented by the group and facilitated the group to arrive at common consensus and prioritising the same.

Later in the evening children invited the adults, village elders and traditional leaders to see the map, list of issues and started explaining them why this is drawn, what children want to do, what sort of support they need from adults and sought their opinion. This was a creative step forward where children plan something; provide evidential proof with its implications to community health and self esteem of the village etc., call for a meeting with adults and seeking their support. There had been strong discussions far and against children initiative but children were able to strongly negotiate and put up their case for which the adults have agreed towards the end.

Children ensuring inclusion:





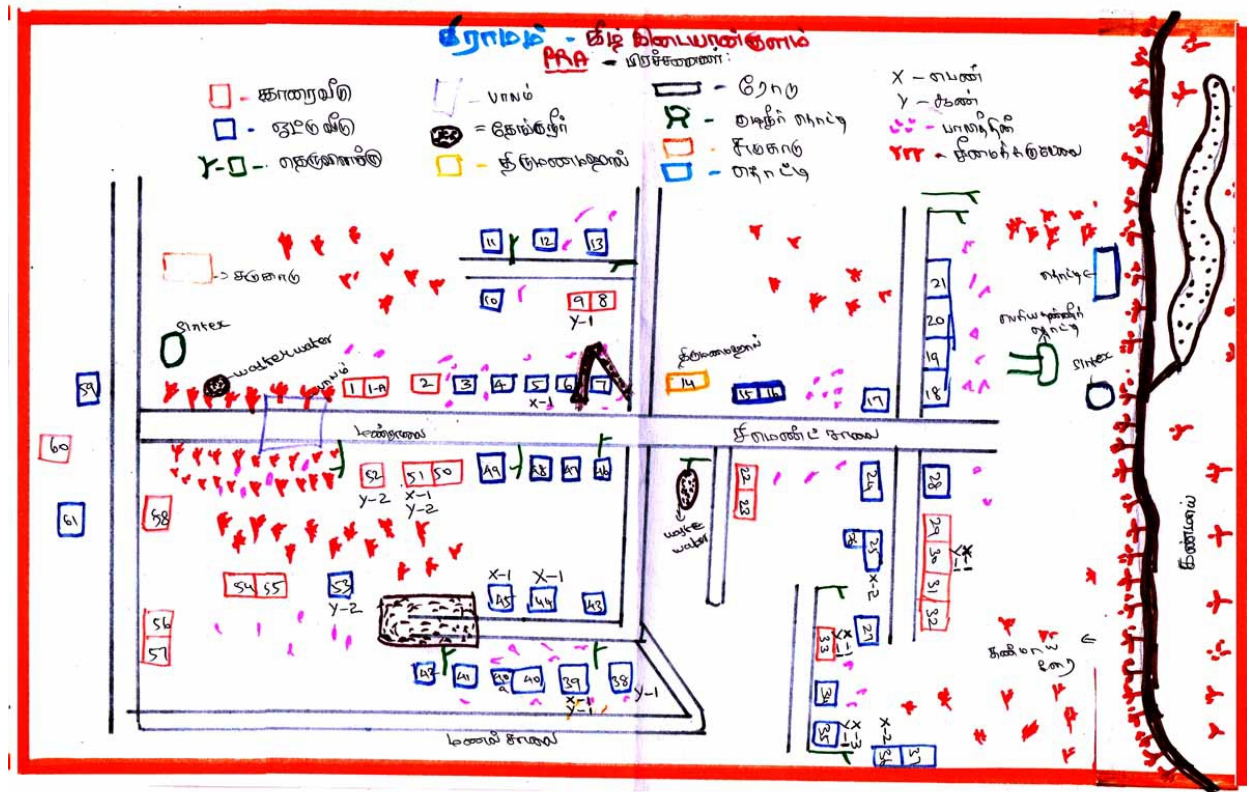
Then the concern of few children/youth being left out in the village for they being away in nearby towns and cities for higher studies/employment was raised in the group. This issue was further discussed in their group and arrived that the team will conduct quarterly meeting during one of the week end when most of the peers, who are out of the village will return home. Thus the quarterly joint meeting forum, wherein all members, including those who are away on education or employment purposes stay outside the village, come and join on a regular basis. It is at this forum

- ❖ Children update every one as well address conflicts, assess, review and evaluate the effectiveness of action plans
- ❖ which creates awareness about Climate change and its implications to child rights, is relevance to our village, livelihood, health and future context
- ❖ children get space to raise issues that concern/effect their daily lives
- ❖ the frequency of children meeting or informal discussions increase is an indicator for children showing interest
- ❖ children get opinion on the quality of the work carried out by members and make series of consultations with adults
- ❖ learn from peers on how they perceive the progress as well what are the issues they think that they could not solve at the local and take that as effective feedback to derive issues for advocacy at the panchayat/block level and join hands at state level and at the National level based on the issue and its relevance.
- ❖ Though initial changes with bathing place started small and modest initiative gradual growth, looking for other diverse issues, inclusion of cost based children was a big challenge too, but manageable
- ❖ The first social and resource map kept changing frequently with overwhelming or ambitious inputs from children and elders. To balance, accommodate and retain the interest is a real challenge. The “mood meter” tool from PRA basket help Sivabarathi and other leaders to critically review the situation and overcome the process.



*Action plan and activities carried out by children:*

S. No	Problems	Action
01	Usage of Polythene bags is High	Children will start Polythene collection from their home.
		Establish Polythene collection point by linking with Panchayat in the village street.
		Establish degradable and non- degradable waste collection box at village level with the help of Panchayat.
02	Open defecation	Approach the resource organization / Govt. departments for construction of individual toilets
		All the children and their family members avoid/ reduce the usage of open place for defecation.
03	Waste water stagnation at street side	Promote soakage pit in front of the house with the help of Panchayat.
		Approach the Panchayat for construction of waste water channel
04	No common bathroom facilities for adolescent girl	Approach the resource organization / Govt. departments for construction of common bath room
05	Climate change issues	Negotiation with farmers for removing the Seemai karuvel (prosopis juliflora)
		Increase tree plantation with the help of Panchayat and forest department
		Conduct campaigns and Street play on climate change issues for awareness creation.
		Convince yielder for increase the usage of the CFL bulbs at all houses.
		Approach the interested house owners for establishment of rain water harvest systems.
06	Under weight children	Conduct health check camp and awareness camp with the help of Primary Health Centre.
		Monitoring vaccination with the help of Health card maintained by CMCJ
		Convince Parents for increasing no of BIG ( Bio intensive Garden) to get fresh nutritive vegetables
		Establish herbal garden at common place or interested farmer's garden.
		Discussion on health and climate issues at all SHG and CRPC meeting by CMCJ team members regularly.



On completion of the action plan the first activity children decided was to get away from water stagnation by creating a earthen drainage along the slope and to ensure self esteem of adolescent children since everyone was taking bath in open place as we practice open defecation. Thus children made a campaign across the village by going door to door canvas to convenience their parents/elders to construct a common community bathing place separately for women and men. Thus, children coming up with such a proposal were well appreciated by everyone in the village and adults have easily come forward to support such an action. They manage to raise free labor and skilled labor support from their own village since they had skilled masons who are part of the village community. With a view to support this initiative of children RCPDS supported with construction material for the bathing place. Children have taken this positive response to their side and negotiated with adults to ensure access for all families in the village for Adequate, Safe, Affordable low cost Sanitation and basic health services, whereby improve the children led Environment protection mechanisms.

Overall action plan was presented to village elders and panchayat representatives for their consent and support. As second intervention children started to lobby with local panchayat as well some of the land owners on whose lands prosophis is densely grown and blocking the road access to their village. Almost after three to four rounds of negotiations children succeeded in convincing the panchayat who had given permission to uproot the thorny bushes and make clear access. Children are still on their way to implementing the rest of the activities. What is more important is that the level of child participation and setting a model for the other neighboring CMCJ children to take up such initiatives in their own villages.

It is not just a matter of children coming to gether, executing few physical activities or demonstrating child participation, but it goes beyond towards strengthening the value system of younger children and realization of their basic right to participate. Building this model to scale is also planned with view to allow real learning and engagement for networking. It is carefully thought out that, when changes are first being explored we wanted to keep it to be modest in scale, so that any risk or conflict of interest remains manageable while learning happens. To highlight some of the key breakthrough children achieved as a result of their active involvement and participation include .....

- Addressing the terms of inclusion of all children - those who are away in nearby towns for education and various other assignments.
- Making adults in their own community to understand environment sanitation, need for environment protection core elements of child protection and relevance of climate change in their own context
- The course of action and wider learning across peers along the way.
- Finding Resources through managing relationship with elders and local government
- Making locally available and culturally sensitive design of intervention

***Challenges faced by children in the process:***

- ✱ Difficulty in helping other fellow children understand the significance of their voice and the need for them to speak up, give comment and lead a healthy debate without accusing each other and raise voice when their rights are violated
- ✱ Difficulty in facilitating children to involve, participate and voice their concerns without inhibitions of any kind
- ✱ Balance between different age groups (13-18 years).Thus addressing diversity of concerns becomes difficult
- ✱ Wide range of exposures and caste concerns as well addressing the facilitators own biases
- ✱ Ensuring children regular attendance at the quarterly meeting is difficult since school, college study systems greatly differ.
- ✱ Dealing with the emotions and sentiments of the children at the meetings
- ✱ Setting realistic expectations with the peers
- ✱ To get ethical acceptance and consent from family elders, panchayat leaders was a big challenge initially.
- ✱ It is not just a matter of demonstrating children participation, but turning to scale to involve adults and community as one unit is a big challenge





These are some of the basic values and skills adapted from the facilitator side to make child participation to happen:

- ❖ Genuine, non patronising and respectful communication skills;
- ❖ Being sensitive to and with children's issues;
- ❖ Being aware of child protection and your responsibilities to protect children;
- ❖ Giving our children a strong trust feeling that we are serious about listening to them and taking action;
- ❖ Making children feel that what we do with children is not tokenistic and that local panchayat as well adult functional systems and structures are supportive to act on children's views;
- ❖ Creating inclusive environments by negotiating with children and providing them with choices
- ❖ Learning from mistakes as part of an ongoing reflection

**Article by :**  
**RCPDS team along with Siva Barathi and team**