



hubs and centres

for developing children's participation
and child protection in China

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PUBLICATION DETAILS

First issued December 2005

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SUMMARY

This paper¹ looks at the potential creation and use of children's centres as a means to initiate and develop child protection services along with children's participation. The centres are real physical spaces and periods of time that are children owned and managed. The centres also act as hubs, that is they provide focal points for coordination, training, and services for child protection through maintaining a network of multi- sector departments and agencies. Following a short introduction and background note on the importance of developing child protection systems, some elements of the potential role and workings of centres and hubs are described. The paper aims to serve as stimulation for further development of existing work by agencies including Save the Children in China. It does not aim to provide a blueprint for any particular centre, but some general principles and actions that should underlie development. Each centre and hub needs to reflect local conditions, issues and circumstances where children's rights, particularly to protection are unrealised.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	10
CHILD PROTECTION AND CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION	11
- Child Protection Systems	12
- Participation	14
- The Family and the State	15
- Child Welfare in China	17
INTEGATED CHILD RIGHTS PROGRAMMING	20
- Centres and Hubs	22
CENTRES	23
- Core Values and Characteristics	24
- Activities	26
- Adults	28
- Boundaries	30
- Outreach and Links to Local Communities	31

HUBS	33
- Staffing	35
HOW THEY WORK	37
PARTICIPATION	39
CONCLUSION	41
- Floating Support	41
- Centres and Hubs as Starting Points	42
Notes	43
References	47

- **hubs and centres**
- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

INTRODUCTION

Localised centres for children in China are offering potential for the development of community-based child protection networks and services. Currently, examples of these local centres are physical spaces for children, integrated with multi-sectoral approaches, and each focussed on different themes. These centres can contribute to the initiation of a broader child protection system which would, in turn, strongly and effectively implement China's child protection laws, plans of action and the state's commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Incipient and pilot projects have begun and are becoming consolidated, some for example through partnerships between local governments and non-government organisations such as Save the Children, while other potential child protection hubs and centres are government sponsored institutions that are undergoing change. As the potential of centres for vulnerable children becomes recognised, and the use of them grows, it is likely that more agencies can and will make use of them, particularly the emerging and developing non-government sector (for example, working on HIV/AIDS and related issues in Henan), and as different levels of government introduce new responses to meet their responsibilities in the changing circumstances of children. Partnerships between local government and Save the Children currently make use of a variety of local centres. For example, in Anhui, the San Li Jie and San Shi Tou children's libraries, Happy Family Club, and children's activity centre, are all parts of an approach to the care and protection of vulnerable children.

This approach is becoming consolidated around child protection and children's participation, and defining a role for centres both as physical spaces for children, and as hubs for the integration and networking of services for children. This approach is being replicated in partnership with government in Qingdao, and a model is developing that focuses on the rights of all poorer and vulnerable children, that aims to be inclusive, but that also adopts particular primary themes in response to local circumstances. For example, looking to include disabled children in particular in Lvminfang in San Shi Tou, and the children of migrant families in San Li Jie. This initial work has provided examples of a strategy that works in both urban and rural areas.

This approach and model can be taken further, for example in looking to work with children in conflict with the law, and to street children, to children at risk of being trafficked, and in communities where children and families are affected by HIV/AIDS. Other government partnerships involving children's centres include two in Yunnan. The Women's and Children's Centre in Ruili works on prevention and care for HIV/AIDS and could bring more of a focus on children and operating as a centre/hub for children. In Kunming, the Panlong Government has been developing a children's centre in connection with the Justice Project and work on alternatives to custody for children in conflict with the law.

A different type of centre is developing in Tibet, initially focused on health but linked to a school. This is the *Yargay Tsopka*, a children led and managed development group, established in the summer of 2003. Here children are taking various important responsibilities for health and hygiene in the local village, developing their own skills and broadening out their scope of interest.

A major element is that the centres are, or aim to be, places for children, run by children. Those in Anhui are child focused and began with children

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

running their own libraries. In Tibet the children's development group is run by children and has potential to move in various directions. The initiation of these centres and the development group was facilitated by adults, but can change in the future as children become involved in starting new centres and groups in other places. Some skills were needed for adults, and so complementary work has been undertaken on children's participation, especially in developing skills and methods of practice, or work with children, through experiential training on children's own research projects. A number of pieces of child led research or investigation have now been completed, and this method of work can also lead to the establishment of centres, groups and networks. These pieces of work done by children include: in Beijing a national research project by children in residential care; in Yunnan research on vulnerability by children in Ruili; and in Anhui research by HIV/AIDS affected children on vulnerability and AIDS issues.

In addition, there are other centres sponsored or run by government for vulnerable children and which offer potential for developing complementary approaches and linking up with existing projects. These include the Street Children Protection Centres, run by municipal and provincial governments, which are subject of forthcoming new regulations in 2005. In addition, the developments in foster care provision in China, announced at the Ministry of Civil Affairs conference in October 2003 (co-sponsored by Save the Children) suggests that welfare homes will be phased out as accommodation, to become support centres for foster care and provide temporary or emergency shelters. These government run centres could also become 'community based'², owned by children and linked to child protection services under an integrated child rights programming approach.

The essence of the approach of using centres offers great potential for developing an holistic approach to child protection and children's participation,

networked across communities and government departments. This paper looks at reasons for children's protection centres and children's participation, the importance of integrated child rights programming, and in particular the working of these centres: first as spaces for children, and outreach to children; and second as hubs for multi-sectoral approaches to child protection.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The term children is used throughout this paper, in accordance with the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, as humans up to 18 years old. But many older children prefer to be called young people, and the use of Centres and Hubs applies both to children and young people in all senses. So, the term children here should be taken to mean children and young people.

CHILD PROTECTION AND CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

The background for the potential use of networked children's centres and hubs as a means toward the development of child protection services is the rapid social and economic changes of the past twenty years in China. These changes are contemporary with others, and should be coupled with the theoretical and practical shifts in conceptions of childhood, the international validation of children's rights and the start of child rights programming. Children's participation has become recognised as an essential component for the realisation of children's rights, for the benefit of children, their families and their communities, and for better delivery of services. Child protection has been identified as an important international issue.

Social and economic changes involving practices of 'marketisation' have been found to increase children's vulnerability to exploitation, abuse and neglect, as older welfare systems and community safety nets undergo change. New laws are often enacted but an effective, active system for their implementation frequently lags behind. Services for child protection must operate at the community level, because that is where the children are. These services need to be linked horizontally (across different communities and neighbourhoods in urban and rural areas) and vertically (through different layers of government, who are important duty-bearers for children's rights). But without a local focus, holes in any safety nets may be invisible, and children

are likely to fall through. In addition, there are people who do not act in the best interests of children and who aim to exploit children for their own ends, and so will not only make use of any gaps in provision, but will actively create such holes.

In developing its own community-based system, China can make use of experiences from elsewhere. The work being done by government at different levels on the use of centres, however, is already developing local solutions that are making use of local circumstances and can respond to international principles - and ultimately operate in the best interests of the child.

Child Protection Systems

A major issue for many children in China is the lack of an effective and implemented child protection system. Although legislation exists, along with verbal commitments against child abuse and neglect, effective and implemented mechanisms for taking up cases and supporting exploited and abused children have yet to be instigated, and agencies/government departments allocated active responsibilities. Set against this, of course, is the fact that even in countries with longstanding and supposedly comprehensive systems for child protection there are and have been failures on a number of levels. For example, recent inquiries have revealed the extent of abuse in residential care in the UK, problems with foster care, and failings of social work systems when children have died at the hands of their parents or carers.

One of the main problems in many countries, such as the UK, has been different government departments (including education, health, police and social services) and voluntary sector agencies (non-government organisations), which are responsible for children, not communicating or working together. Calls for multi-sectoral, multi-agency or multi-departmental working have

• **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

been made, and proposals for a unified agency to take the lead. In the Netherlands since around 2002, a single ('one-stop-shop') agency has been the first point of call, taking responsibility for interviewing children, agreeing a response to their circumstances, and referring on to other agencies. In Queensland in Australia, the abuse of children in foster care provoked an inquiry and a wholesale change in the State government's approach, with the creation of a new Department for Child Safety focussing on children.

These examples are from countries with well-developed and relatively well-funded state provision, professional accredited training at different levels, and a wide range of non-government agencies providing services and advocacy, in addition to legal services. Despite the extent of this provision, there are still problems for children, as noted above. But, increasing public awareness of the problem of child abuse, and recognition that it is not acceptable, seem to be the reasons behind the increase in referrals to child protection services such as that in Queensland, along with greater realisation of the size and extent of the vulnerabilities, risks and dangers to children. Alongside a recognition of the need to change and improve child protection services, there is also increasing development and acceptance of children's and young people's participation in Europe and Australia, particularly for children in care, that is, those found to be at risk of or experiencing abuse and in need of protection. Other countries around the world, such as India, are also emphasising children's participation in services as a means of developing child protection.

Although a well-established child protection system with professional qualified and accredited staff is absent in China, children have rights through the Convention on Children's Rights (ratified in China in 1991), and other human rights instruments. In China, the experiences and perceptions of childhood are changing. Children are experiencing a range of circumstances

that are new to adults, and have a different range of needs and vulnerabilities in this changing social and economic environment. This means that it is clearer now than perhaps ever before, that decisions about children's lives, needs and rights cannot be taken by adults alone based on their own experiences of childhood. While there will be certain values and feelings that adults want to pass on to their children and the next generation, they need to understand how changes impact on children's lives. One of the important ways of doing this is through children's participation in consultation and decision-making. For the development of effective child protection systems, children's participation is crucial in identifying problems and solutions, in consultations on how services are run and implemented, and in making decisions on their own lives.

Participation

Children's participation has long been recognised as bringing benefits to children themselves in their personal development, by inculcating and improving a range of skills, not least decision making. Also in bringing benefits to communities and organisations, where children's views on services and the environment are valuable in themselves, enhancing local life and services. Also, children's participation brings their own action in communities for the benefit of local people (such as children's management of the water and sanitation system in a village in Tibet, comparable to a much lauded example from South America).

But children's participation is essential in child protection work, services and systems. Adult violence towards children and the sexual abuse of children, and the emotional abuse of children, and neglect, also occur in localities where it is often popularly imagined that children are safe - in institutions made for children such as schools, clinics, centres. The sad fact that places

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

where children spend most time are not always safe for them, means that if child protection is to be realised, children must be enabled to speak out with confidence. That means that when children speak they are listened to and their concerns acted upon. Cultures of openness, responsiveness, trust, respect, honesty and transparency in children's organisations and elsewhere are required to do this.

Children's participation is becoming possible in China, although the education and school pressures mitigate against this and raise other concerns for protection and rights. For example, children living in welfare homes in 2003 conducted their own research and made presentations of their findings at the National Conference on Foster Care held in Beijing in October 2003. Children affected by HIV/AIDS living in central China, including orphans, developed and conducted their own research in 2004, and made drama presentations to local government officials on their situation and concerns in August. Other pieces of research done by children and young people have included street children and others at risk of dropping out of school. More examples of children's participation are being disseminated, such as children becoming involved in school management in a primary school in Yunnan (see Yang X 2004).

The Family and the State

An additional context for the development of child protection services is the potential tension between the family and the state as experienced in other countries. Amongst all the failings of child protection and welfare systems in the west, there is also a public debate, conducted especially in the popular press, over the issue of the extent of state involvement in family life. This struggle is expressed in a double bind for welfare and other services. First, media outrage when children are abused or die when in the care of the

state, or die when living at home supposedly under the protection of social services and other agencies. But then second, an equal outrage on behalf of some parents and others when children are removed from home because of concerns for their protection. The struggle is especially vehement in the UK, which is seen by some as having a particularly confrontational child protection system, in which removal of children from their family home has been seen as an early resort. In contrast, in some continental European countries, a more conciliatory approach is emphasised, keeping children at the family home and working with parents.

Any development of a child protection system involving the role of the state in intervening in family life in China is likely also to be contested, given the historical and traditional ideology and primacy of the 'family' as a social unit, and particularly the nature of Confucian style intra-family relationships.

But the protection of children from exploitation, abuse and neglect is essential, particularly where communication and transport is creating a faster pace of life, and children (and older people) are likely to be paid less attention. There is a need for a community focus, to make best use of local knowledge and understandings, and to be active in providing safety for children (and similar but different provision might be argued for older people). But governments are duty bearers and there must be a system to over-ride local practices that may have developed where abuse is somehow taken for granted. The recent (2004) court prosecution of men on a small Pacific Island (Pitcairn) for abuse over several years has indicated how some watchfulness is essential. Abuse (sexual, physical violence, emotional) is never acceptable because of the damage done to individual children and to society. Hence, there is a necessity for child protection services, and for children's participation in their design, delivery and evaluation.

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

Child Welfare³ in China

Child abuse, neglect and exploitation have not been seen as significant problems (or even problems) in China for much of the past fifty years or so, although this is now recognised as changing. Newspaper reports of violence against children by parents, teachers and others have begun to indicate part of the problem. Some aspects of neglect (such as abandonment of children) are reasonably well known, and the increasing public discussion of sexuality and sexual activity amongst young people (and adults) is likely to help enable a climate where issues of sexual abuse and exploitation are more openly discussed. However, there is a need for an effective system to be readily available to deal with physical, sexual and emotional abuse when it is identified, as well as neglect.

The invisibility of abuse and exploitation over the past fifty years is partly because social problems were supposed to have been eradicated with the development of the socialist system and adoption of a path towards a communist society. In addition, the welfare system in China until recently was essentially based on the *danwei* or work unit. People in a *danwei* worked together and lived together, and the *danwei* was responsible for health care, welfare and recreation. Social and economic life was closely bound together, and mediation through very local level government (hierarchies linked also to *danwei* leadership) dealt with difficulties. There is (and was) some emphasis also on the importance of the family as a unit in providing care and pooling resources, which might also be linked into traditional Confucian ideas that emphasise filial duty (and a subservience of wife to husband). Together these systems and ideas mitigate against any perception of a need for protection of children within the family, and against investigation and action against incidents where, for example, violence is known. Furthermore, a degree of violence toward children (beating them) is accepted and expected by some adults, explained

as a correct, necessary and effective means of raising children, but again having a long tradition. Such a tradition, of course, works against the broad stream of child protection as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, because of a cultural perception that violence against children is wrong but beating children to 'educate' them is somehow right and in their best interests. The problems here concern the misuse of the idea and term 'best interests' and the lack of understanding of the dangers, social and individual, of beating children. For example, physical damage and emotional hurt that is very often long lasting and has severe impact, and the instigation of and continuation of cultures of violence, including bullying of other children.

The participation of children, that is their consultation and involvement in decision making on matters that affect them, has also faced constraints of traditional ideologies and socio-political systems. For participation there is also, simply, the problem of time, where the non-school time of urban children is consumed in extra lessons in a variety of subjects, because of pressure to succeed in examinations and go to higher education (see West 2003, West and Chen 2005). Educational pressures have also caused problems beyond the lack of opportunity for participation in consultation and decision making, but also denial of rights to recreation and play, and in particular problems not only of emotional stress but also suicide.

Where children were (and are) orphaned, they are generally cared for by relatives. Where this is not possible, or where relatives become old or die, or where children have been abandoned and family is not known, they have come into the care of the local government. Such care has been in residential 'welfare homes' and corresponding homes are provided for older people who have no family to provide for them. Disabled children and adults are prominent features of these homes. Street Children Protection Centres, responsible for temporary care of children found separated from family on

• **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

the street were constructed by government in the 1990s onwards, providing temporary care and aiming to return children to their families (see Ministry of Civil Affairs' paper prepared for the residential care conference in Stockholm in July 2003). Changes in the regulations for street children work are planned partly because of increasing difficulties faced by children, including newspaper reports of children taken from their families, deliberately injured and forced to go out to beg.

In recent years, economic change has altered the basis of the *danwei* system. Many state-owned enterprises have closed, and workers become unemployed, or workplaces have gone bankrupt and been unable to provide pensions. New welfare and social security provision is required. Geographical and other inequalities have increased the lure of migration, not only for subsistence but also as a means to larger incomes. While many children have prospered under the economic and social changes, and have become a focus for future family prosperity (through pressurised education), other children have experienced poverty, lack of access to school, vulnerability to trafficking, to crime, and to separation from family (see West 2002). At the same time, awareness of the circumstances of some children and the need for greater protection has grown. Furthermore, a number of factors have led to greater awareness of children's rights and local problems of abuse in families, communities and schools. These factors include media publicity given to abuse and neglect of children and, for example, the development of 'quality education' through training of teachers. The problem is how to develop a child protection system in these circumstances, and to identify duties especially where multi-sectoral work is required, in a context where departments and agencies are used to having their own area of responsibility and not collaborating. The notion of duty-bearers for children's rights, given prominence in the shift to child rights programming in recent years, offers some ideas for moving forward.

INTEGRATED CHILD RIGHTS PROGRAMMING

Since the turn of the twenty-first century the idea of Child Rights Programming (CRP) has been taken up as a paradigm for many organisations working with children around the world, including Save the Children, UN organisations and many others⁴. CRP combines the use of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other rights instruments, the sociologies of childhood theory, practice, the research and evaluation developed through the 1990s, with the development of children's participation. In practice it means taking an holistic and integrated approach to provision for children. Also, here, children's participation means children being consulted, children being involved in decision making, children being active in communities and local decisions, and children establishing and running their own organisations.

CRP has an emphasis on duty bearers (along with key child rights principles such as the best interests of the child, non-discrimination, inclusion, participation and protection), and analysing children's circumstances as a means of articulating and fulfilling children's rights. The development of CRP and rights based programming in general has passed through stages of awareness raising and training of staff, to the beginnings of changes in practice, revisualising of projects and aims of work, and the initiation of pilot and experimental programmes.

• **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

One aspect of these developments is greater attempts at integrated 'CRP' work. CRP is now taken here as an abbreviation for integrated holistic approaches to children's inclusion, protection and participation, and the identification and development of duty-bearers roles (see also West 2004). In the past much development work with children has been undertaken in projects that have been focussed on sector specific work. That is, programmes have identified particular areas of need, such as health, education, HIV/AIDS (or focussing on areas of existing organisational expertise or interest) and looked to responses in those sectors. Otherwise programmes have focussed on particular categories of children, such as street children (although this group is impossible to define adequately), separated children, trafficked children, which are effectively 'subsets' of local populations of children, and looked to their needs. CRP emphasises two aspects of work that require changing these approaches. The first is to take an holistic approach, that is to look to the whole rights and whole circumstances of the child, which goes beyond sector specific projects. For example, not just the healthcare, prevention and treatment of children affected by HIV/AIDS, but also their education and participation in local life. The second, overlapping theme, is to look at the local context of all children and the needs, rights and inter-relationships of all children in a particular area, looking to inclusion, equity, participation and protection overall.

Integrated programming therefore extends sector specific and category specific work into local contexts. The means and processes of doing this rely not only on circumstances of children but also analysis of duty bearers - asking who has the duty or responsibility for fulfilling children's rights. For example, street children's right to education might mean not simply providing street based education but looking at problems of inclusion in local education provision, such as access to schools. Similarly, development of child friendly

schools or ‘quality education’⁵ might go beyond children’s access to education and the nature of schools, to look at rights to protection, health care and participation (see West 2004).

The broadening of these approaches and development of work in China, instigating an integrated practice of child rights programming, offers great potential and benefit for children. However, in taking these ideas beyond the level of rhetoric, this work also faces particular challenges. It would seem that the centres provide the scope for initial moves towards not only CRP, but in particular an incipient system for child protection and for the ‘institutionalisation’⁶ of children’s participation.

CENTRES AND HUBS

These terms were first adopted for use in the models being developed by Save the Children in partnership with local government in Anhui⁷, and the ideas are here further expanded. What is set out below is what centres are working towards and aspiring to be. There is no centre yet working at ‘full capacity’ as outlined, and changes may occur as practice develops and incorporates local circumstances, needs and responses. There is no blueprint, except in that certain elements are crucial, such as children’s participation and child protection, and strategies to push these rights and practices out into the local neighbourhood, village and community. Because child protection and children’s participation are essential, so too are other values, principles and approaches, such as non-discrimination, respect, taking children seriously, and these are laid out here.

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

CENTRES

Centres are most easily thought of first as physical spaces (see also below) with certain characteristics. These characteristics are not the features of the physical construction or environment, but of the culture that needs to be created and maintained by the people working in and using the centre. The existence, life, creative functioning and success of a centre does not depend primarily on its physical surroundings, although the nature and use of the space plays a part. These characteristics come from values and methods of working with other people. Thus, it is the social environment that is the most important, that is the feelings, relationships, behaviours enabled by the people in the space. These would include, for example, a sense of being valued, of respect for others, being taken seriously, being protected, being able to participate. Because the physical surroundings are less important than the social environment, the centre is effectively a mobile space, consisting of a set of values and principles and a set of activities, and so it can be established in most places, at least temporarily. The children's community centre might be better seen as a geographical and temporal space. That is, a place and a time when the community of children comes to life through various activities in a social environment where they feel (and are) safe and protected, where others take them seriously, and they are or can be involved in decision making.

This is not to suggest that the physical surroundings are entirely unimportant because, for example, boundaries need to be set in place and

in time (that is, a demarcated area designating the space, and times of starting and finishing, so that entering and leaving the centre is clear). The environment needs to be child friendly, and attention paid to the use of materials and symbols to be coterminous with the social values espoused.

Core Values and Characteristics

While the nature of the physical centre depends on the locality, and what is available and what can be obtained, the social characteristics need to be consistent and applied wherever the space is established. These social characteristics include:

Neutrality - the centre is a neutral space: it is, or should be, owned and maintained by children but not by one particular set of children. This means that it is also:

Open to all - the centre aims to be inclusive, for all children, but also encouraging groups of children who often feel or experience low self-esteem, social exclusion, stigma. This means that it is also:

Anti-discriminatory - the centre works to be non-discriminatory in its own space, but also to actively combat discrimination. No stigma is attached to any children, which means that it also has a culture of :

Respect by and for children and each other - adults working at the centre with children and children themselves should respect each other. This especially means that adults should treat children with respect and:

Take children seriously - that children's ideas and views are listened to and treated seriously. This means that the centre is:

Children owned and child-friendly - space is designed and used and

• **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

managed (and changed) by children. Their ideas are not only taken into account, but they are empowered to make decisions and use budgets. All of these issues mean that:

Participation- is at the heart of the work. By participation is meant that children are making decisions, taking action they have decided, organising groups, and being consulted and being involved in decision-making with adults. For the centre itself, the onus is on children's participation in running the place, deciding and undertaking activities, and a space where they can be consulted by adults and involved in decision making about community affairs, and especially about the development of child protection and other children's services.

In order to be able to participate, children need to feel safe and inspired, which means that:

Protection - is an important element, for the space to function, be open, be used by children and for children to be taken seriously. Child protection within the centre is essential and facilitators must have a view to extending it outside. Child protection means protection from abuse, and includes protection from physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and exploitation. It also means that work must be undertaken to combat bullying. Protection and participation of children take the role of the centre outside the physical space it occupies - see Outreach below.

Fun and engagement - the centre is used and owned and managed by children, even if initiated or set up by adults. The centre needs to have incentives for children to come, and so must have a place for relaxation, recreation, games and so on - fun! Fun is used here as a shorthand for ensuring that the space engages with children at their level of interest and ideas, starting from where they are.

Activities

So the centre is not only a place for difficult, and serious issues. The notion of fun and recreation is at the heart of the centre, in providing an incentive for children to come, and these activities in turn providing a vehicle for informal education and training⁸. The selection of activities should be made by children themselves, and some budget will be necessary to fund the initial range. The activities and materials available in the centre would depend on local culture and interests of children. These might include games, but also books and comics, and special one-off events, such as visits to parks, festivals etc.. Materials might not only include equipment, such as cameras that can be used and borrowed, musical instruments, paper and pens, but also resources for drama, dance and performance.

Resources are not just about material things, but include people such as teachers and trainers. That is, adults or other children might be brought in to facilitate the development of skills or interests, or to facilitate drama or musical performances. In particular, older children can be valuable resources in facilitating newcomers and in the development of children's organisations. There is a need to ensure that older children (or any child) do not dominate, by following principles outlined above. Also to look at issues of continuity so that no single group of children take over the centre for themselves, which means that other children have not become involved and once this group moves on into adulthood the centre is effectively unused. The important elements are inclusion and participation of children.

Thus, the centres may be places from which children develop their own groups and even organisations, even their own media. But equally, the centres might be simply a place for relaxation, not only for play but a space and time in which to just talk to others, sit quietly, read and so on. The key is children's participation and them deciding what to do, along with the

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

recognition of change over time, that different cohorts of children want different things, and that this change and difference needs also to be actively facilitated.

The activities in the centre might also include formal training sessions, for example in learning to play musical instruments, but also informal education and training. The role of any adult workers is important here, such as the 'liaison workers' in Anhui, or staff or volunteers (who maybe paid) who open the physical space and, in some cases, facilitate activities and sessions with children. The creation of an open, respectful, non-judgemental and serious relationship with children enables even recreational activities to be used as education and information vehicles (consistent with the values of the centre). For example, a game of ping-pong, with participants focused on the activity, can be simultaneously used as a discussion and information giving session on difficult issues. The game here provides a 'cover' for the discussion, in that participants do not have to look directly at each other but can supposedly focus on the match. While playing the game, participants can talk about problems, matters of concern, difficulties in personal lives, or ask questions about sensitive topics. Difficult issues might include relationships, sex, HIV/AIDS, drugs, and so on. Such discussions thus also provide a vehicle for communicating accurate information, correcting misconceptions and misinformation, for example on reproductive health. This work does, of course, have implications in that the staff (paid workers and volunteers) must themselves have accurate information about the topic under discussion, hold to the values of the centre, and have the skills in responding to or even initiating such conversations as appropriate. In addition, the centre might be a venue for other training activities for children, but the subject and timing of those activities should be decided by the children, and should not be part of, or an extension of the school curriculum. The centre should be providing different and additional skills and learning to that on offer at school.

The centre is also a space and time where the voices of children can be broadcast. This might include activities where children make known their ideas, views and opinions on different themes. The ‘broadcasting’ could involve developing a local children’s radio station (which might be too complex and impractical at the moment), but it could mean children painting a mural, developing posters and so on. These *children’s voices* activities also mean that the centre is a place where adults can come and consult with children and seek their views (although it must be emphasised that any centre will not be, and must not be taken as, representative of the local population of children).

Adults

Apart from being a space for and by children, with resources for children, the centre can also hold resources and act as a space for information and education about issues and services for children. For example, training for adults on child protection, on caring for children, on positive discipline (non-violent punishment), on prevention of separation of children from home and so on. The centres provide good opportunities and space for the training, support of and regular engagement with foster parents. Here the centre as a neutral space should also enable the bringing together of staff from a number of agencies to participate in training and other events, although all should also respect the values of the centre. This is an aspect of the role of centres as hubs (see below).

Finally, as part of adult-child partnerships, the centre might develop special services for particular local groups of children, depending on local needs and issues identified by children. For example, the Children’s Activity Centre in Lvmianfang, Hefei, Anhui, has particularly developed rehabilitation work for disabled children, but should also encourage non-disabled children to attend and so enable practices of inclusion. Other centres have developed

• **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

different lead services or specialisms as noted above, such as the Happy Family Club in San Li Jie, Hefei that includes migrant children and the centre in Panlong, Kunming that works with children in (potential and actual) conflict with the law. In turn, disabled children should be encouraged to attend these centres. In places in central China, such as Fuyang, Anhui, where there are large numbers of children and communities affected by HIV/AIDS, a specialist focus could develop working with children affected by HIV/AIDS. Here for example, centres could look to support services for child headed households so that children remain in their community and attend school. Centres could provide support to carers for children and develop foster care services. Centres should work against stigma and discrimination everywhere, but take up anti-stigma and anti-discrimination work on AIDS. Other services might include 'peer counselling' for children affected by HIV/AIDS. The current government-run Street Children Protection Centres might change their remit to become 'drop-in' centres, places of refuge, recreation, advice and support for all children, but specialising in those who are homeless or floating children.

The issue of advice and support for street children, might be a more general function developed in all centres. By following consistent values of respect, taking children seriously, and being non-judgemental, centres become places where children find trust and support. They can then also look to these centres as places where they can get accurate information and advice. This might extend to legal advice and information, and to counselling services. Such services might be run and facilitated by volunteers or paid staff, and might also include children in organising and providing support to other children.

The role of adults in the centre is, however, crucial. It is imperative that the values of the centre are upheld consistently and constantly. Training and guidelines are probably necessary for any adults involved, in addition to

regular review and support sessions. If adults are present they need to be engaged, but not dominating or controlling. It is frequently found that adults interfere (even unintentionally) with processes of children's participation (for example, answering for children), or simply stand around and watch which can intimidate children. Where centres have adult caretakers, or liaison workers, this is especially important. Adults should not, of course, abuse children in any way, and centres need to ensure that children are safe from exploitative adult workers. These are important reasons for ensuring children's participation and for children taking a lead in running the centre.

Boundaries

The issue of child protection noted above highlights the fact or likelihood that the experience of children outside the centre is very different to their periods of time in the centre. Inside the centre non-discrimination, respect, and participation is or should be taken seriously and encouraged, but outside the centre children may experience the opposite. For example, time in school where teachers are perhaps strict authoritarians, perhaps violent and are certainly powerful. The existence of a centre where values are different is not unreal or inappropriate, but provides both a refuge and a developmental space. Children using the space recognise that it is a different environment and that rules and agreements inside are not the same as outside. For this reason, the boundaries of the centre, physically and temporally, need to be clearly marked. But in addition, children are not paragons of virtue, and may learn discriminatory practices or bully others. If the centre space is to be properly neutral, act as a refuge and offer opportunity and scope for children's rights, then children must also know that it is a space that they respect and show that in their behaviour. These practices must be worked at, because the situation of successful centres is always changing, since new groups of

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

children come who do not, at first, necessarily know and appreciate or agree with the values of the space.

Outreach and Links to Local Communities

Child protection, children's participation and the likely fact of life outside the centre being different, raises the question of the role of the centre in local communities. First, an important role might be as 'outreach' for other children⁹, that is, to take aspects of the centre's activities and values and practice to children elsewhere in the community. This outreach work might include passing on information, finding out other children's views and voices, but also bringing other children to the centre where services (for example, some work or equipment) cannot be taken out. The nature of outreach work might depend on the location of the centre and the geographical areas to be covered. If a permanent, physical centre is used as the main base in an area, then floating stations or hubs might be established in other places around.

Second, in order that the centre does not become an isolated, lonely refuge, work must be done using it as a base or focal point, to develop children's participation and protection and other activities outside the centre. Here the centre is not a physical space so much as a hub, a point with strands reaching out to people and agencies across the community. This involves linking up government departments and agencies, other adult groups and the local public, in creating awareness of children's participation, protection and potential, training in working with children and child rights, and other services and responses for children. Also in facilitating children's decision making and enabling children to join and be part of committees, groups and other forms of local consultation and decision. These aspects of the centre are part of its use as a hub.

HUBS

The hub is a focal point for the development, linking and networking of child protection services and for children's participation. A hub may usefully make use of the children's centre, but does not have to be based there, or have a presence there. The need for such a hub is because of the necessity of coordination work not just for child rights programming but essentially for the development of an active and effective child protection service. This type of work is multi-sectoral and multi-agency, which means that there is a risk of no action being taken, unless there is effective leadership and coordination of a committed group that liaises well with each other. At present in China such a child protection service, looking at abuse and violence towards children in all settings, or even only in schools, is absent. Law and regulations exist but are generally without implementing agencies and procedures.

However, a start on developing an active and implemented child protection system can be made in local communities. The development of local children's centres can be used to stimulate child protection through the processes of bringing together government departments, local agencies, and local people for training on children's rights. The engagement of different agencies and training should also work on raising issues of child protection in the community and make it possible to look at specific cases of abuse and respond to them. The combination of a culture of taking action, and responding, and children's participation, is important in this whole process. Children's participation is a

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

mechanism for raising general issues and concerns in children's lives that are linked to protection. Some of this work has been noted above. But because of the fact that some children experience abuse, neglect and exploitation in places designated, where they should be safe, such as schools and other children's institutions, often only children are aware of what is happening and can raise the problem, and it is imperative that they are listened to, their concerns treated seriously and a real response is made. The hub, as a network of individual staff and agencies that have duties in regard to child protection, is the place where a local procedure can be designed and activated through nominated people.

The work of the hub thus includes training for individual agencies, especially government departments and mass organisations, on a range of subjects connected with child protection and children's participation and the lives of particular groups of children who use a centre. For example, a centre with a large number of disabled children might have particular strengths in disability training and rehabilitation work, for adults as much as children. A centre with a large local population affected by HIV/AIDS, and families infected by HIV/AIDS, might specialise in the provision of support, counselling, advice and other services for children, and be linked into such work for adults. The hub looks to development of work including training with and for adults, for the benefit of and in the best interests of children, and in partnership with children.

The hub holds together multi-sectoral and multi-agency work, that is, it provides a focus and can also provide a physical space for that work. This might include training events, coordination meetings, strategy development and so on, for child protection and other services. All of these would involve children working in partnership with adults, for example on coordination committees or councils. In this way the work of the hub becomes formalised,

in providing channels for communication for government departments and other agencies. Because of the difficulties of multi-sector working in China at present, where each department has its own sphere of interest and is almost self-contained, each centre as a hub for communication might provide a means or vehicle for multi-agency work, through the espoused values and focus on children.

Staffing

Children's Centres, and Hubs need core staff and/or volunteers who are able to work with children in an open, participatory way, as well as acting as confidants, mentors and even counsellors and advisers at times. Staff and volunteers in and linked to both Centres and Hubs should be committed to, and follow the values laid out above as being important characteristics of a Centre.

The Centres themselves should be principally run by children, and those children who adopt leadership roles could also be considered as staff/volunteers, and may need some capacity building and other assistance. (But care must be taken not to establish an elite group of children, whose relationship to their peers becomes less open and participatory - the values of a Centre apply to all.) Thus, some adult facilitation will probably be required, especially at first, since the concept of children's own organisations is not much known in China. But adult staffing levels should be minimal, especially since the role is that of facilitation and not that of teacher or controller.

The Hubs, although 'virtual' would also need to have some core adults involved who are committed to these principles and who are capable of working with children, and who consult with children and facilitate their involvement in decision making. As the Hubs increase their activities in child

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

protection, and developing procedures for child protection, then they may also develop roles for designated adult staff in dealing with cases of child abuse, neglect and distressed children. These roles may grow alongside the development of services, requiring counsellors, supporters, investigators, mediators and so on.

In addition, a small group or individual on behalf of the Centre might be delegated to liaise and mediate with the different agencies who should be involved in responding to children's issues. This person, in reality, needs to have particular skills and seniority, since they will be important in the formulation of an active Hub.

Adult staff and volunteers will need some training and support in values, principles and practice of work with children, especially participatory work. These areas of work (and training) are indicated above, including treating children with respect, taking them seriously, and issues of confidentiality. There are also specific competencies such as facilitation skills, counselling and certain knowledge (for advice and information work) that should be acquired. Both adults and children can acquire these competencies. One important reason for adult or 'staff and volunteers' (who might include children) being trained is for sustainability. Children may acquire skills and become very active, but if the Centre is to remain a Children's Centre, then many of these children will and must move on (not least because they will grow into adults), and other children start to use the place. The continuity of values, principles and activities may need some permanent staffing, although these may also be some young people who previously used the Centre.

HOW THEY WORK

Only some points about the process of operating a Centre are noted here. Important points concern the structure of opening hours and activities, and the practice of staff/volunteers. There are also issues to do with the environment and location (most appropriate sites), and making the best use of space and time available to ensure children are and feel welcome, and have some sense of ownership.

Regular opening of a Centre is essential so that children know it is there and when it is available for use (see also below). The activities should be run by children as much as possible, rather than the format of teacher-pupils being deliberately or inadvertently copied. The relationship of children and adults in this space should be very different to the relationship at most schools, and ways must be found for children to decide how the Centre should be used and what should happen there. They may also be allocated a budget, if funding is available. The participation of children in the Centre need not follow typical adult methods of committees and leaders, but can develop different means.

How to do all this? There is a requirement for adults to put in a conscious effort in terms of this work, being aware of their own and others body language and communication, and aware of the environment, the mood, and the change from the familiar for both adults and children - a new experience.

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

An essential part of running a centre and for training and development of staff, is documentation. This means keeping records of what happened each session - such records do not have to be secret, and a number of children might meet together at the end of a session to review and record what has happened. The process of review is important also for adult facilitators to reflect on their work and the process.

All staff should have a set of core competencies, and then some may have or need additional skills of work, for example in rehabilitation work for disabled children, work with violent or angry children and so on. There may need to be different opening times for different activities, for example separate hours set aside for some counselling and group work sessions.

The detail of practice methods for working in centres deserves to be the subject of a separate paper, including the general approaches and then depending on the focus required, but skill in participatory work with children is clearly at the top of the list.

PARTICIPATION

At the heart of Centres and Hubs is the development of children's participation. Issues and processes in this are not discussed here, and other materials can be provided (see for example, the book *Child Participation in Action* published in Chinese [and English] by the All China Women's Federation and Save the Children, that includes some background papers, and additional papers are available from Save the Children).

One issue is important. The aim of this work is to provide a vehicle towards the development of effective and integrated child protection services and for integrated child rights programming. But one of the main problems in the development of children's participation in China is the emphasis placed on education and the enormous pressures experienced by children at school and in doing well at study. This reduces the time they have available for activities of choice, for recreation and for play. The time available is most limited for those children who themselves or their parents feel or expect to do well at school and have an opportunity to go to university or other higher education. These children might need services of a Centre in finding some relief from pressure. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is the children who do well at school who seem to be most likely to be selected for 'participation' events, such as acting as representatives, or attending children's and young people's forum. While Centres may need to be able to respond to academically successful children at school who are experiencing emotional stress and

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

distress because of pressures, the initial focus of Centres should be on vulnerable children, those perhaps more likely to drop out of school because of stigma or other domestic pressures, those living in poorer communities, those separated from parents, migrants and so on.

It is the children who are not doing well at school or who feel they will not have a chance of going on to higher education or even senior middle school, who might have the most time available for using a centre. The Centre would provide them with a number of means of personal development. These children also might be the poorest and/or particularly vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking and so on. They might also be susceptible to HIV/AIDS. Thus, these groups of children might be the best, initial target, and are also those for whom child protection services are important, including prevention of exploitation, abuse, separation, trafficking, migration to the street, and so on.

CONCLUSION

Floating Support

Centres are essentially spaces comprised of physical places at the periods of time when they are open, which operate a consistent environment and culture that values, protects and respects children's participation. Hubs are an invisible network, communication channels, that can be activated via a Centre and perhaps making use of some of the same physical space (or an adjacent space) for training, meetings and running networks.

Once it is realised that the Centre is not necessarily fixed to a single place, it can be seen as 'floating'. That is, the Centre can be realised by holding sessions in a particular place and at a particular times. For example, in a village that is too small, or too poor to support a permanent space dedicated to children and open several days a week, then a floating centre could be used. This would consist of facilitators and resources coming to the village, for example once a week at set times, to enable and provide activities and services with and for children. These activities and services can be the same as those provided in a 'permanent' space. The timing would need to be frequent and regular so that children knew and could plan to come. As with all opening times, these sessions should be planned with the children.

At the same time this Centre would also be a Hub, in providing a local focus for child protection activities, children's needs and rights. Some training or other workshops with adults could be provided around the same time.

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

Centres and Hubs as Starting Points

The socio-economic context in China is changing rapidly, as are children's circumstances. The use of Centres/Hubs is not advocated as a permanent means of addressing child protection and children's participation, but as a vehicle for initiating the development of services. These services need to be flexible in order to respond to local situations, but also to take account of the fact that for the vast majority of reasonably well-off urban children their participation through such Centres is a long way off. Most of their time is consumed through work of 'education', passing tests and examinations, getting as high a score as possible. It is with vulnerable children that this work will start. The question of protection of children in pressurised and stressful system of education needs further consideration, but is unlikely to happen without consent and action by parents and teachers and these issues are not addressed here. However, a start must be made somewhere.

Notes

1. This paper is a revised and edited version, with some additional material, of a discussion paper with a similar title, 'Centres and Hubs: A Focus for Developing Child Protection and Children's Participation in China', issued in March 2004, and with a greater initial focus on the work of Save the Children.

2. The term 'community-based' is in common use but not well defined. There are problems with the meaning of term 'community' itself (as extensively described in the literature, one academic, for example, noting well over fifty definitions being in use a decade ago), and then the term 'community-based' offers scope for further confusion. This paper does not address problems with the term 'community', neither its contested definition and scope nor its conceptual role as a marker and replicator of ideas of modernity (that is, that the use of the term seems to have become more widespread in the nineteenth century, with an awareness of change and difference, and the development of sociology and anthropology, etc.).

3. This background section on welfare is essentially for readers without knowledge of China. But please note that this is neither a comprehensive description of the history of welfare provision, nor of its current manifestation and does not pretend to be. For some additional information on this area see West 2002.

• **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

4. The Save the Children Alliance has been heavily involved in developing concepts and training on child rights programming and the work taken up by many other agencies. See, for example, Theis 2001 and 2004, and SCA 2002

5. 'Quality education' is a term and concept promoted by the Chinese government, and suggests different and improved teaching methods in preference to rote learning. The Save the Children basic education projects in Yunnan and Tibet are demonstrating 'quality education'.

6. The 'institutionalisation' of children's participation is a term that has been recently used, but alternative expressions need to be found, since institutionalisation is not a good term - being suggestive of inappropriate residential care settings, detention centres and other pejorative connotations.

7. A note on Save the Children and developing work with children in China.

Save the Children has been working through Programme Offices based in provinces in China for nearly a decade. The work has progressed from the early stages of seeking entry points, which was initially and successfully undertaken especially through provision of training on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and taking up of opportunities thus presented, to becoming an organisation with credibility and reputation at various government levels in many provinces. All of Save the Children's work has been conducted in partnership with government and mass organisations, ranging from Ministry of Civil Affairs, Public Security Bureaux, Education, Justice and Health departments to the Women's Federation and Youth League. The need to engage with and achieve effective collaboration with government departments has influenced the shape of work. Government departments are used to single sector working - 'Coordination across and within different levels of

government is very rare' (Hales et al 2003) - and in response Save the Children has generally had to form key collaborations or partnerships with one department as the main partner for a project. This has brought benefits but also limitations for child rights programming, especially when beginning to look at issues of duty bearers, where, for example, the education needs and rights of children in conflict with the law, or trafficked children, might fall outside the scope of the main partnering department.

One means of challenging the limitations of this sectoral approach might be seen as community based programming. But this also tends to require a single government partner and focus on a particular issue, because in the socio-political context, for work to be sustainable and influential (and in practice), there is no point or possibility in engaging with 'communities', without at least involving local governments. The local non-government organisation (NGO) sector in China is, in practice, barely visible, given the size of the country. But the promotion of the 'socialisation of welfare' suggests that service delivery NGOs, especially for welfare and poverty issues, are seen as the way of the future. In addition, crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic in central China have led to the development of local NGOs. Developing integrated CRP must therefore look to hybrid approaches and the notion of centres and hubs, in a community based context, seems to offer a way forward. The focus on the centre, run by and for children, offers a potential neutrality and a physical and 'virtual' space for integrated work on children's rights.

8. The terms informal education and training are used here in the sense used in the UK, meaning processes of education and training that are participatory, can take place anywhere and not in a formal setting, and usually include matters not found on the school curriculum. It also occurs outside school. Lifeskills education may be another term for these processes, but all terms seem to be contested and ill-defined.

- **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

9. There is a difference between 'outreach' and 'detached' work in youth work in the UK. Outreach work operates from a centre, taking services out and bringing children into the place. Detached work concerns working with children and young people where they are, on the street, in parks or other places, and not making use of a centre at all. Detached work has potential in China, but first some basic child protection services are needed in order for detached work to be successful.

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• **hubs and centres**

- for developing children's participation and child protection in China

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ACTIVITIES SUMMARY

CENTRES

A centre:

- has children's participation and fun activities as core.
- holds and has access to resources, both material and human.
- ensures core competencies and values of staff and space, such as respect, non-judgemental, inclusion, anti-discrimination and so on.
- provides child protection through lifeskills, informal education, counselling, advice, information services.
- provides outreach work into the community.
- has children involved in decision making on use and role of centre, budget, staffing etc..
- has specialised provision as appropriate.

HUBS

A hub includes:

- coordination group for child protection and integrated rights programming.
- training for staff.
- training for agencies.
- regular communication and liaison.
- agencies involved taking up and responding to issues for children as a group and individuals as appropriate.
- specialised provision as appropriate.