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Increasing children's participation in African transport planning: reflections on methodological issues in a child-centred research project

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This paper examines the potential for applying child-centred research methodologies which involve children doing their own research (with adult facilitators) within a transport and mobility context in West Africa. Relatively little attention has been paid to the transport needs of the poor and powerless within African transport policy and planning: the specifics of children and young people's transport and mobility needs are essentially unknown and unconsidered. Using evidence from a small pilot study in Ghana, we reflect on both the opportunities and the challenges of work in this field. Although the paper is focused on the specific issues raised by child-centred research, it raises broader questions regarding the potential for research partnerships with vulnerable groups and, more specifically, the challenges of developing more collaborative research processes within transport studies, where technical priorities still regularly triumph over social concerns.

Keywords: child-centred research; participation; transport; Ghana; Africa; methodology

Introduction

This paper examines the potential for applying child-centred research methodologies in West Africa within a specific transport and mobility research context. In Africa transport policy and planning is commonly a male-dominated preserve still focused principally on road building, with little attention paid to the transport needs of individual user groups, especially those of the poor and powerless (Booth *et al.* 2000, ODI, London. Final Report, June, p. 46). The specifics of children and young people's transport and mobility needs are essentially unknown and unconsidered. This is an extremely short-sighted perspective, given the fact that today's children represent Africa's future: their access to health care and education are, not surprisingly, essential components of the Millennium Development Goals (Fay *et al.* 2005, *World Development*). Moreover, children of 6 years and above often make a substantial contribution to current household production and survival strategies.

Although transport does not figure directly in the Millennium Development Goals, transport improvements are essential to their achievement. If African countries are to meet the MDGs, it is

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clear that issues concerning children's mobility and transport will have to be addressed more directly. This requires both information on children's needs, and commitment from policy makers and practitioners to addressing them. Our paper focuses principally on the former component—information gathering and analysis—drawing on our experience in a small child-centred pilot study in Ghana to reflect on the potential for children and young people to participate in the process of social research in Africa. It is written specifically from an academic researcher perspective and raises issues about the collaborative process and the role of place and context in participatory research which have relevance to wider debates regarding the practices of participation in the Social Sciences.

Children's participation and the development of child-centred research methodologies

Much so-called child-centred academic research is actually conducted by adult researchers who work in a participatory way with child respondents i.e., children are consulted to ascertain their views (for instance, through in-depth interviews) but do not actively participate in research design or as researchers. It would probably be more accurately termed as 'child-focused' rather than child-centred. When we initially started to plan a study of child mobility needs across three country settings with a wider group of researchers (in Ghana, India, South Africa), we had in mind a fairly conventional study of that type in which adult researchers would conduct participatory research with children, parents, teachers, health-workers, transporters and other key actors. However, the Indian children's NGO with which we had started to collaborate suggested that we try out a more innovative, truly child-centred approach of which they had considerable experience (albeit not in a transport planning context). A subsequent section examines how this shaped our methodology in Ghana, where children were assisted to plan and undertake their own research. Firstly, however, it is useful to briefly review the history of child-centred approaches.

The origins of recent work promoting the role of children in researching their own experiences and needs can probably be traced back to the introduction of child-to-child approaches in the late 1970s (Pridmore and Stephens 2000). They were first developed in an international health education programme focussed on training older children in poor countries to communicate health messages to younger siblings, but subsequently evolved into a more ambitious programme whereby children might educate their families and communities (see Obeng 1998 regarding a small health project in Ghana; Mahr *et al.* 2005). The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) represents a particularly significant way-mark for child-centred studies because it affirms children's rights to participation: the right to give and receive information, rights of association, and rights to participation in cultural life (with the proviso that the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration). However, full recognition of the implications of UNCRC has been taken on board relatively slowly. Edwards, writing a decade ago, noted that even within the Save the Children Fund there was considerable debate and some resistance to children's participation (Edwards 1996). In recent years the potential for children to participate in a range of other communication and advocacy activities, including a more proactive role in participatory research, has been promoted with increasing determination by many child-focused NGOs; notably in projects with working children (for example, Lolichen 2002). Save the Children has played a key role in promoting child-centred studies in working children and other contexts. Concepts of children's rights and empowerment are central to these efforts and, as Black's recent case studies of seven child labour projects (including one in Senegal, West Africa) and other studies illustrate, the impacts of participation can be remarkable. The case studies presented by Black emphasise the substantial opportunities offered by child participation for self expression and personal growth, such that the impact on capabilities, social relationships and outlook on life has been profound, with positive benefits extending

beyond the children themselves to their parents and other community members (Black/Save the Children 2004).

Save the Children's (2000) briefing paper on research, monitoring and evaluation with children and young people provides a valuable overview of the practice and ethics of child-centred studies and includes a range of participatory research methods which have been used successfully with children. This puts the emphasis on partnership with children—the importance of collaborative work between children and adults—but also on allowing children to plan and carry out their own research. It stresses that participation is a right, that involving children in research 'more centrally' helps throw light on key issues, that it can then result in children being 'more effectively involved in decision-making and follow-up action' and, by taking their opinions into account 'provide a sense of empowerment' (p. 5). However, it also notes that it is not always appropriate to involve young people in research, drawing attention to issues such as skills and abilities, and whether the children concerned have more important priorities. These points are apposite to the discussion which follows.

Most academic researchers in the development field seem to have been less attracted than NGOs, to date, to taking on child-centred approaches which involve children themselves participating as researchers—i.e., not just research *with* children, but research *by* children in which children research their own lives and conditions. This is probably not surprising, since *adult* participants are rarely drawn fully into the research process as researchers within academic studies: the researcher, by virtue of his or her academic training, has a privileged role and gatekeepers in the academy may have a vested interest in maintaining that arrangement. While there are certainly examples of deep participation in which academics have successfully undertaken work in a highly collaborative fashion with individuals or communities, passing on skills and technical advice to the research subject (and vice versa) (for example Kesby's (2000) work on an HIV peer education project in Zimbabwe using participatory diagramming), such ventures are still the exception (Pain 2003, 2004, Pain and Francis 2003). Indeed, there is a growing literature concerned with the potentially negative aspects of participation (e.g., Cooke and Kothari 2001, Parfitt 2004). Kapoor (2005) is particularly critical of the convenor's 'self-discretionary powers': the potential for behind-the-scenes stage management.

It may well be the particular dangers inherent in collaborative work with children, among the least powerful of subjects, which has restricted involvement of academics in deep participation in this field. Nonetheless, there have been some notable efforts by academics (often in collaboration with NGOs), such as Nieuwenhuys' (1996) action research with street children, Hart's (1997) work in environmental education, which specifically considers local environmental research by children, and Bourdillon's (2006) research with child domestic workers in Zimbabwe. Recent work by Cahill (2004) is particularly noteworthy because it involved a young academic researcher joining together with six other young women in their teens and early 20s to design and run an action research project (in New York). The collaborative auto-ethnography they produced indicates the remarkable insights which may be achieved through this approach which prioritises insider knowledge: notably the space it gives for questioning exclusionary practices and social inequalities, the emphasis it allows on multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory lived experiences, and the opportunities it offers to move 'beyond the thick description of ethnographic tradition, to actually interrogating the spaces between' (p. 283). However, it must be emphasised that academic studies which take such a truly child-centred approach are rare: the examples cited above are exceptional.

The lack of engagement of most academic researchers in the Social Sciences with child researchers may be linked to diverse reasons: the professional concerns noted above, but also ethical concerns, logistical limitations, concerns around their competence to work with children etc. A certain reluctance to 'hand over the stick' in any substantial way (i.e., beyond basic information gathering) to children and young people may not seem unreasonable given the complex

ethical issues and power politics met in so many development research contexts. A review from academic researchers Pole *et al.* (1999) observes, in the context of a UK ESRC-funded study on work and labour with young people that, despite the best intentions of the researchers, the structure and organisation of academic research 'inevitably reduces children to the status of at best, participants rather than partners and at worst objects of the researchers gaze'. They argue that this is due to methodology, rather than method, because acceptable academic knowledge is defined in relatively narrow, conservative terms and children, by virtue of their age, lack research or academic capital. Procedures for securing the research contract influenced the methodology in their study from the start, since this excluded children from the design phase: given the importance of research design to the research process, children's involvement was inevitably reduced. A fixed cost contract and time limitations imposed further restrictions. Certainly, the pressures for rapid research results within the university research and funding context faced by many academics² are likely to militate against working with child researchers since the preparations alone—as we show below—require a very substantial time commitment.

These and other hurdles can not be ignored, and academic researchers will certainly need to reflect on them before embarking on the process of a child-centred study. On the other hand, given the very special dilemmas around consent, access, privacy and confidentiality encountered in research with children because of age-related unequal power relations (Mauthner 1997), the child-centred approach appears highly advantageous from an ethical perspective. Alderson (2001), an academic specialising in childhood studies, suggests a number of important advantages of peer research by children, not least the fact that they may choose more appropriate questions, topics and terminology and have an advantage in 'ice-breaking' because of their ability to combine work and play. While recognising the danger that peer researchers may identify with their interviewees so closely that they make assumptions which an enquiring outsider would avoid, she argues that, with assistance, young children can participate even in the more complex aspects of research such as planning and theoretical analysis, and that the 'novelty and immediacy' of children's research reports can bring publicity and greater interest in using the findings (p. 151).

Transport planning and knowledge of children's mobility and transport issues in sub-Saharan Africa

In addition to the potential constraints on academic child-centred research work discussed above, research with children in the transport sector presents further challenges. The majority of transport planning in Africa's roads and highways ministries is undertaken by male civil engineers trained principally in road construction and maintenance issues. They face an unenviable task given the scale of Africa's transport problems and the notoriety of the roads sector in terms of corrupt practices and political interference. In recent years international donors concerned with pro-poor growth have been putting pressure on the sector to take a more integrated approach to transport (i.e., to consider transport services, including intermediate/non-motorised transport, as well as roads) and to consider the needs of poor people, notably women, but with limited success (Porter 2007, Porter *in press*). Although there is a growing literature dealing with gender issues in transport, mobility and accessibility and despite the emphasis on gender mainstreaming among donor agencies, only lip service is paid to women's transport needs within most transport ministry walls, whatever the externally directed rhetoric. Similarly, although studies of community transport needs incorporating participatory approaches have become more common, as a result of NGO and donor pressures for local-level rural accessibility planning (Starkey 2001), findings from participatory research seem to have a tendency to disappear under the weight of more pressing (often political) considerations at the implementation stage.

While women's interests are little served by transport ministries, those of their children are almost invisible. In part this can be ascribed to ignorance of children's needs and the significance of those needs for future development trajectories, discussed below. However, the entrenched attitudes among most transport engineers (with a few notable exceptions) to the incorporation of social issues in transport planning is likely to militate against improvement, even when information is available, unless substantial efforts are made to ensure knowledge is transformed into action. We will return to the issue of take-up of findings by transport planners towards the end of this paper.

Remarkably little is known about children's current mobility patterns and use of transport in sub-Saharan Africa, and even less about their transport and mobility needs. Socio-spatial studies of child mobility in the continent are very rare, although there is a large published literature (in Sociology, Geography, Anthropology, Education, Health Science, Child Psychology, etc.) on related issues such as child labour (usually *without* specific reference to children's common roles in headloading/porterage), education and child health. Increased poverty and dependence on children in sub-Saharan Africa, associated with Structural Adjustment Programmes and the spread of AIDS, has led to a spate of studies on child poverty, street children and children's work (e.g., Bonnet 1993, Robson 1996, Canagarajah and Coulombe 2001, Ersado 2005) and to broader studies of children's rights and violence.

A few studies have touched on the mobility of children in urban settings such as Schildkraut's study (1981) in Moslem Kano, Nigeria, where the mobility of children is essential for the maintenance of wife seclusion, and work by Grieco *et al.* (1995, 1996) in urban Ghana (Accra), which shows how the falling off in transport provision associated with structural adjustment measures has increased dependence on the work of women and children. In the very different context of urban Uganda (Kampala), Young and Barrett (2001), consider the spaces of homeless and marginalised street children, and van Blerk (2005) points to the important links between identity and mobility of street children.

Beyond the cities and the tarmac road, in fields and remoter villages one enters a very different transport world, usually dominated by human porterage. Here women and children provide the main transport effort, though children's role in particular is rarely recognised. Malmberg-Calvo's (1994) examination of the role of women in rural transport (based on travel and transport surveys in four countries) is noteworthy in this respect since it incorporates some basic data on children's contribution to transport. Katz's (1991, 1993) research in rural Sudan shows how young children deliver messages and carry food around the village, and subsequently travel more frequently, depending on their birth-order position. No other study is so clearly focused on children's mobility in rural Africa.

The one transport area where we might expect coverage of children's issues is road safety, but even here the information is remarkably limited (for rare examples see Adesunkanmi *et al.* (2000) on Nigeria, Mock *et al.* (1999) and Abane *et al.* (2005) on Ghana). Moreover, much of this road safety work lacks a gender perspective.

Most of the studies referred to above involved some direct consultation with children, but one of the few in which children seem to have played a significant proactive role in the research process is the study by Young and Barrett (2001) in which children used disposable cameras to take photographs about areas of children's lives which the adult researcher would have been unable to enter as a full participant observer.

Background to the Ghana child-centred field pilot

Ghana presented an appropriate and interesting country context within which to develop a child-centred research study. It is fairly typical of sub-Saharan Africa in terms of the domestic roles

that children (especially girls) are commonly expected to play (i.e., their substantial contribution to household chores and often also to family livelihoods), the continuing gendered inequality of access to education (favouring boys), and the lowly place occupied by children as a whole in family and community life (Avotri *et al.* 1999, Blunch and Verner 2000, Save the Children 2002). However, it was also the first country to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (in September 1990), has seen considerable activity to address child trafficking and girls' urban migration (for portage work) and has been the focus of a major study of violence against women and children. Ghana's Poverty Reduction Strategy (2003) sets out a programme for further improvement of children's lives: free basic primary education (schools currently collect obligatory contributions from students), alternative education for children out of school, intensifying awareness of the CRC and the Children's Act, especially on child labour (in partnership with NGOs and CSOs), and streamlining the legal system to protect children. These strategies are likely to receive considerable donor support, given the country's relative stability and its tendency to accede to donor requirements in governance and other areas.

The actual impetus for the three-country pilot study of child mobility and transport issues, within which our Ghana children's pilot took place, was an earlier field study in southern Ghana, led by Gina Porter. This earlier field work in Ghana focussed on women and transport but drew attention to children's transport and mobility issues. Interviews with children had been included in that study. It suggested some broad propositions about children's mobility and access to transport and the wider impact of children's mobility constraints on livelihood opportunities which we felt needed further exploration and, if correct, addressing:

- Lack of reliable low cost transport may severely affect access to regular education, with knock-on impacts on subsequent livelihood opportunities.
- Lack of reliable low cost transport may impact severely on children's access to health services (including vaccination and other preventive health services) and to adequate safe water supplies.
- Children's widespread (but often hidden) role as transporters (pedestrian headloaders or operators of Intermediate Means of Transport (IMTs) such as push trucks) may further constrain their access to education, health and associated livelihood options since this reduces the time available to attend school or health centres etc. This is likely to apply particularly to girls, especially fostered girls.
- Some IMTs, notably bicycles, may have an important potential role in improving access to school and other services, but cultural and other factors are likely to impede their adoption, particularly among girls. Policies to promote wider availability of cycles (for learning to ride) and cycle repair courses for girls and boys in school might impact positively on school attendance.
- Mobility constraints may impede children's subsequent livelihood opportunities through impacts on both education and health and thus reduce overall long-term potential for poverty eradication. The constraints are likely to be even greater for girls than for boys.
- Mobility constraints on children are likely to be higher in rural than urban and peri-urban areas, but even in an urban context there may be substantial constraints on access imposed by transport factors, particularly for girls.

We were keen to explore these contentions in Ghana through in-depth field research and to undertake comparative analyses elsewhere.

With the assistance of the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD), we found collaborators in two very different countries (India and South Africa) with a strong interest in children's mobility and transport: in India this was an activist NGO, in South Africa the transport section of a national research institution. Since the Ghanaian component was to be run by an academic research group based in the Geography department of a

university, our core team for the larger project comprised a diverse set of practitioners and academic researchers who brought different skills and perspectives to the study.

Our Indian NGO collaborators were keen to promote a child-centred approach rather than more conventional participatory study in which children were merely consulted and the project collaborators decided that work towards development of a child-centred methodology for studying transport and mobility issues and testing this in the field should have first priority. Consequently the inception workshop was held in India and led by staff from the Indian NGO. This workshop included adult collaborators from Ghana, South Africa and UK, and 29 Indian children who had not worked with the NGO before and were thus unfamiliar with child-centred research approaches. Our main aims for the workshop were to review findings from our desk literature review, discuss the potential for applying the innovative child-centred approaches currently used by our Indian collaborators (in a child rights context) to transport/access studies, examine the ethical issues of research with children, and try out some possible quantitative and qualitative methods with children. The children worked together with the NGO staff in a series of activity sessions conducted over 6 days. These sessions were used not only to prepare the Indian children for undertaking the research studies but also to sensitise them to the potential children have to take their findings forward and engage with policy makers about their findings. The children helped refine and tested a variety of possible quantitative and qualitative data collection methods for studying mobility and transport, including one-to-one interviews, focus groups, observation through route transects, accessibility mapping with flashcards, ranking exercises, and traffic count/load weighing. Different age groups undertook different components of the work, since children's ability to undertake specific tasks tends to increase with age and biological maturity.

Following the experiences gained at the inception workshop, the Ghanaian and South African collaborators returned home to pilot the child-centred approach and various methods they had observed. They established Country Consultative Groups³ and undertook preliminary field tests. The final review workshop for the larger project took place in Cape Coast, Ghana. Meanwhile the pilot continued in India with extensive testing. Because the NGO collaborators were highly experienced in working with children and had well-established linkages to various communities nearly 150 children (mostly school children) were involved altogether, working in three different test sites (remote rural, rural and peri-urban.) By contrast, tests were smaller in terms of number of children involved and sites (in Ghana 12 children at one (peri-urban) test site, in South Africa 13 children at one (remote rural) test site. The scale of the pilot in India was facilitated by the NGO's experience of child-centred research, their network of field staff and their well developed links and reputation in the region.⁴ Thought-provoking conclusions have emerged from each of the three country studies, but hereafter we focus on the Ghana component, since the contextual detail required to situate each study precludes a three-country perspective in this paper. Moreover, since the final project review workshop (with an accompanying stakeholder meeting) was held in Ghana, this allowed stronger insights into the local reception of the study than were available elsewhere.

Piloting the research methodology in Ghana

The concept of children researching children's issues is uncommon in Ghana and no local NGO working directly with children in ways comparable to the Indian NGO's child-centred approach could be found to participate in the pilot field study (though a number of local NGOs became involved as Consultative Group members, discussed further below). Fortunately, this potential difficulty was substantially eased by the fact that the four Ghanaian academics involved in the field pilot all had substantial experience of working with children since all initially trained as teachers and had been involved in training teachers earlier in their careers.⁵ They had undertaken

map work and surveys with children as part of the Geography curriculum. Consequently, the range of methods we had discussed in India were already very familiar to them, though the concept of children *leading* the research was very new. We were additionally fortunate in being able to obtain funds to bring two staff from the Indian NGO to Ghana to facilitate the initial training programme with the children.

Making the preparations needed before the initial training programme and field pilot could take place in Ghana took considerable time. Preparing the ground involved finding children who were interested in participating in the study, obtaining consents from head teachers and parents, and setting up the Country Consultative Group. We had already made a decision to limit the Ghana field test to a small number of local school children, because of the novelty of the approach being attempted, and limitations of time and funds. Nonetheless, simply obtaining the necessary approvals was difficult, despite the university's excellent local connections. Much time had to be spent first getting the approval of the Municipal Directorate of Education in Cape Coast, then finding local schools willing to participate in the project through letters to heads of schools and personal contacts (some refused). A large number of schools were contacted and permission finally obtained from five schools for children to participate. Once children had been selected/expressed interest in participating, letters had to be sent to parents from the school heads to obtain their permission for the child's participation. Twelve children and young people—seven boys and five girls aged 11–19—a mix of self-selection and school selection,⁶ eventually took part in the training workshop and field testing. While all expressed great willingness to be involved in the project, this procedure itself was not ideal (albeit necessary in the context of our time constraints) and raises issues of adult control over the selection process which would need careful attention in any subsequent research.

The children attended a 6-day training workshop facilitated by two Indian NGO staff and five Cape Coast staff. Following the training workshop, the children and young people conducted field tests in one site, the peri-urban settlement of Breman Asikuma, located on a paved road close to the Central Region's capital, Cape Coast, in a forest transition zone once noted for its cocoa production but now characterised by subsistence (crop) farming and petty trade. In Breman Asikuma dissemination of information on the nature of the study and permissions for it to take place were again essential before work could proceed, so that there was understanding and support for the work. Nonetheless, the exercise was queried by local chiefs who wanted to know why children were being trained and what would be done with the information collected.

Time constraints imposed by the 1-year time-limit for the full three-country project put limitations on both children and staff so far as the field component in Ghana was concerned. Firstly government elections delayed the project some months, then school examinations and project staff's teaching commitments imposed other delays. So, by contrast with the field programme in India, where there was ample time for children to experiment with a wide range of methods and make their own selection, in Ghana it was only possible for the children to try out three (qualitative) research methods in the field—focus group discussions using a check list, one-to-one interviews using a check list, and observation mapping on walks through the settlement with local children. The check lists were compiled by the children in consultation with the adult facilitators. The three methods were selected by the facilitators because they could be taught relatively quickly and would give a good range of information to allow adequate triangulation. All interviews were recorded by note-taking, no tape recording was attempted (given the cost, time and potential intrusiveness of the latter). The children also kept notebooks recording their individual experiences and this helped them in reaching their research conclusions.

The selected methods were used by the children on their own to collect information, i.e., without adults being present. This proved successful in terms of identifying a range of important local transport issues. The participant child researchers were amazed how much they learned in a

one hour session walking with local children around the study village, and were intrigued by the differences between their own perceptions of transport issues and those of the local children. As they pointed out at a reporting back session at the final workshop: *'we observed more potholes than they did'* (Ben, aged 19). They also found one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions very effective: *'people give you respect'* (Gloria, aged 19). Findings from this very small pilot, extracted and analysed through a key themes review process by the children themselves, were extremely interesting and raised diverse issues among different groups of children, some of which we, as adult researchers working in transport studies, had not identified. Long walks to school, potholes and other obstacles along roads, open drains which children can fall in easily (especially when vehicles attempt to pass one another on narrow roads), drenching of clothes from passing vehicles in the rains, loud bus horns which startle children, lack of street lights, shortage of commercial vehicles, taxi drivers molesting girls, and traffic dangers crossing roads were all raised as significant issues. Differences in young children's physical height and the relative powerlessness of children in the community were important background factors which shaped the issues raised. Children speaking to children were able to obtain a very clear view of children's perspectives, and to pick up issues which children were embarrassed—or thought of as seemingly too unimportant—to raise with adults.

Getting children involved in identifying children's problems is only part of the child-centred approach. If children do not see their findings acted upon they are likely to become disillusioned with the activity. Consequently, looking for dissemination pathways is crucial. From this perspective, the identification and collaboration of key adult actors was essential, to ensure that both the concept of child-centred studies and the findings from the children's work produced could be sown in a fertile seedbed. Work sensitising these key actors to the concept of a child-centred approach needed to proceed in tandem with other work in the study. The Cape Coast university researchers established a Consultative Group which included representatives from two local children's NGOs and one International NGO (one with a wide remit), two school teachers, the regional offices of relevant Government ministries and departments (education, agriculture, road transport, urban roads, women and children's affairs), the private transport union (GPRTU), police, National Commission on Children and academics. They met at an early stage in the project, before the individual child researchers had been identified and again on a number of occasions, including being present for 1 day of the training workshop and again at the final stakeholder meeting.

The final review workshop for the three-country project was held in Ghana at Cape Coast. At this workshop the adult project collaborators were joined by 19 of the children who had participated in the pilot (four Indian, three South African and all 12 Ghanaian child participants). The children and adults came together to consider the research process and methods, analysed data from the pilot studies, and reflected on potential solutions and advocacy components of the project. The workshop was accompanied by a stakeholder meeting with the Ghanaian Minister of Roads and Transport, other ministry representatives, the transport union, local NGOs, and others. These meetings allowed the authors to reflect particularly on the Ghana component of the study, and more broadly on the potential for a child-centred approach to studying children's mobility and transport issues in West Africa. Our conclusions regarding the successes and challenges are discussed in the next section.

Reflections on successes and challenges in Ghana

From a number of perspectives, the pilot study in Ghana was successful. Certainly, the enthusiasm and commitment with which the children participated in the various stages of the study was impressive. They collected and analysed a variety of data highly relevant to transport planning, albeit over a short time period and within just one settlement. At the final workshop,

where the children from all three countries reviewed the research process together, the Ghanaian group were very positive about their experiences. They were keen to point out that they had not only enjoyed the project but had learned from it: *'I have been taught many things that will put me ahead of my friends in school and at home'* (Anthony, aged 12); *'We have taught others at school how to do role play... We want to extend the research to different places so we can then address problems'* (Patience, aged 18); *'This exercise has made research less fearful and interesting to me'* (David, aged 17). The Ghanaian children at one participating school not only found the project fun but recognised its potential for initiating change—this had led them to start a 'research club' on their own initiative and they were already busy conducting a study of the eating habits of school children. The staff who led the project were similarly impressed with the children's participation and their achievements. Moreover, at the stakeholder meeting we held at the end of the project, where the Ghanaian, Indian and South African children presented their findings, Ghana's Minister of Roads and other key local stakeholders (police, transport union representative, child-focused NGOs) not only attended the meeting but listened carefully, and responded with a range of relevant comments and questions.⁷

However, the Ghana pilot also drew attention to a number of important challenges which are likely to be widely relevant in the West African context and possibly even further a field. These do not by any means negate the value of a child-centred approach to research but suggest the need to reflect on the strategies which will be required to overcome or circumvent potential problems. We undertook our pilot in what is probably one of the most resistant areas to child intervention. The transport context is highly challenging in terms of even introducing the concept of children's needs, and far more so regarding children conducting their own research. As we noted at the start of this paper, transport engineers at the Ministry of Roads and Highways and the Department of Feeder Roads in Ghana (as elsewhere across Africa), still tend to focus principally on road construction per se, rather than on transport services and user needs. This attitude is changing, but only slowly. Our pilot showed that children and young people can make important contributions to understanding the transport issues that affect them, but strong alliances would be needed between relevant practitioners, academics, policy makers and the children themselves, if this work is to have any substantial influence on transport planning. The fact that NGOs have reportedly been unable to participate in recent reshaping of Ghana's national education strategy (Chant and Jones 2005, p. 195) is a pointer to the hurdles likely to be faced in the current policy environment. Indeed, representatives of youth-led organisations have claimed they were not consulted about 'the nature, or language, of education reform, changes to vocational training or means to extend the youth rights discourse into agenda-setting' (Chant and Jones 2005, p. 196).

This leads on to a broader issue: that of children's roles and rights in Ghanaian cultural and institutional contexts. Despite Ghana's position as the first country to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to set up a National Commission on Children (Lamprey 1998, Chant and Jones 2005), there was no well-established structure of children's advocacy organisations within which to set our study, and whereby children could influence policy. As Lamprey (1998) writes, 'a great deal of sensitization and advocacy is needed at all levels . . . if children's participation is not to be seen as an imposed Western concept'. Consequently, very careful groundwork was necessary in order to implement the pilot project. The argument for child-centred studies linked to children's rights and child advocacy around the mantra 'children know their own interests and experiences best' is likely to raise concerns in such contexts: proposals for child-centred research need to be very carefully prepared and presented. The Ghana government Minister of Roads and Transport at our Cape Coast workshop certainly listened and responded with great care and thoroughness to the issues the children raised on the basis of their research and analysis—a clear indication of his perception of the accuracy and importance of

their findings—but he was also keen to caution that *'adults here also don't want child imperialism . . . do not frighten us with any form of child imperialism'*.⁸

In many Ghanaian cultures there is a strong view that children should know their place [at the bottom rung of family and community hierarchies]: children should be seen and not heard. Thus, although there has recently been much concern expressed about migrant girls' portage work in Accra (the *kayayoo*, see for instance Daily Graphic March 11, 2002, p. 23), following a UNICEF programme to rehabilitate them with the then Department of Social Welfare and local NGOs, child rights are generally perceived as an issue for adults, not youth. Indeed, there even appear to be turf wars developing between local NGOs and the state in this area (author interviews with NGO staff, 2002, 2004).

Some indication of currently prevalent attitudes to children in Ghana is given in a report of a survey on issues of violence against women and children conducted with focus groups and questionnaires to a random sample of women and adolescent girls in 20 Ghanaian districts (Coker-Appiah and Cusack 1999). Beatings were reportedly given in three out of five cases of misdemeanour (ibid, p. 52). Being disrespectful or disobedient to adults was considered justifiable reason for punishment at home (along with refusal to run errands, stealing and a range of other misdemeanours) (ibid, p. 51). Children themselves reportedly understood that talking back at adults 'can and should be subjected to violence as a mode of punishment': they have internalised the roles and responsibilities circumscribed in the societies in which they live (ibid, p. 73). Coker-Appiah and Cusack note that 'many participants . . . took exception to children challenging authority either at school or at home'. They tellingly cite a teacher in Ashanti Region: *'traditionally the child is considered as the property of the parents'*, and other teachers in Western Region who observed that children challenging adults was completely unacceptable, *'being a pocket lawyer'* (ibid, p. 75). A series of fora on children's issues held with district and municipal assemblies across Ghana's regions by the GNCC in 1997 presents a similar picture. Corporal punishment is still widespread in schools and appeared to be supported by many of the regional seminar participants as a crucial means of imposing discipline (e.g., GNCC 1998, pp. 8, 10, 14, 16, 20, 22). The conclusion to the GNCC Upper East regional review notes: 'Some participants argued that Ghanaians should adopt suitable culturally acceptable methods for the application and the implementation of the Convention' [i.e., the CRC] (GNCC 1998, p. 23). Children were apparently not directly involved in this programme.

The evidence presented above suggests that Ghanaian culture is strongly adult-focused and that many children are subservient. However, there are also indications that, given the opportunity to participate, children can make an important contribution. Cusack identified 'a sense from young people that they have rights', 'pockets of resistance to the norms' and some recognition of the need for change (Cusack in Coker-Appiah and Cusack 1999, p. 149). A case study by Black (2004) describing ENDA Jeunesse Action in Senegal offers further indications of this potential in West Africa. The organisation concerned, working with local NGOs, trains voluntary helpers in the community to assist working children form groups, assess their needs and potential and develop their own plans, which are then supported by the NGO (Black 2004, p. 9). The children make financial contributions and manage their own funds, which are used to support income-generating activities and loans to members. Although not apparently specifically involved in research, the activities nonetheless indicate the potential of children's initiatives to change lives. In this case individual children appear to have gained considerable skill in negotiating with family and employers to positive effect, with no evidence of negative attitudes from families or community members regarding children asserting themselves, though cases were known where children had suffered from such actions (Black 2004, pp. 18, 21). Black emphasises that 'positive attitudes were undoubtedly fostered by the fact that child participation was sensitively and supportively introduced' (p. 21): this is a vital component to successful projects. Similarly, the importance of children being prepared for

potentially adverse community reactions and being given access to adult support where necessary are stressed.

While contributions to work in the adult world would seem to confer on children the right to greater participation in community affairs, it also restricts time to participate. The Ghana pilot highlighted the issue of time and labour inputs in child-centred studies both for adult facilitators, where these are needed, but most importantly for the children who participate. Those who participated in this study were school children whose parents consented, but there were still problems with school examinations and other commitments. Most Ghanaian school children living at home are expected to give (unpaid) assistance with family chores. The burden usually falls particularly heavily on girls in terms of time and range of tasks. Many children, whether they attend local school, boarding school, or do not attend school at all, must carry water and firewood each day, and contribute to their own or family income by selling goods, carrying loads or in other ways. This is especially the case in rural areas. So will our child centred studies be truly representative of children's needs or dominated by privileged children with lower work commitments? What about working children, many of whom may be illiterate? Can they participate? Certainly, those with time available to participate in such studies can interview those children who are less privileged. But will they?⁹ There is ample NGO experience with child workers and street children elsewhere to show that, despite time pressures, children will and do participate in studies. Nonetheless, careful monitoring is clearly needed to ensure a broad representation of children is achieved, just as is required in adult participatory studies.

The respective roles of adults and children in a child-centred research project also requires careful consideration. Black (2004, p. 11) refers to the fact that 'because of an emphasis on children's empowerment there has developed a mistaken perception that child participation implies children taking over duties and responsibilities fittingly performed by adults'. The advocacy role is likely to be particularly sensitive: 'the part children play in advocacy should not over-burden them, expose them to risk, or allow them to become professional 'child advocates' on a 'child participation star circuit'. The same considerations would apply in the selection of child representatives to attend meetings of formal bodies, such as child labour commissions' (Black 2004, p. 31). Black's observations are made in the specific context of working children, but they highlight broader issues. In our pilot project in Ghana the adult role was mostly limited to facilitation of the child researchers, including linkages to policy makers through the consultative group mechanism.

Research project scale and time-scale considerations must also be taken into account when considering the roles adults and children play. There seems to be considerable potential for poor practice to emerge in child-centred studies, especially when there are time constraints. Black (2004, p. 11) refers to 'children manipulated by adults to "say their piece" or appear on public platforms in a tokenistic role'. Bourdillon (2005) has also expressed concern about the role and extent of influence of facilitators in child-centred programmes in Zimbabwe. In Ghana our very small pilot study in one settlement took a great deal of time and effort. Local studies at village area level would seem the best route to taking this work forward, but each project would require substantial support from adult facilitators in the short-term. Ghana has a burgeoning NGO sector, but as yet little expertise in child-centred approaches and a lack of supporting structures of children's organisations to support children's advocacy—i.e., to support the process of children taking their own research findings forward themselves.

It seems likely that systematic regional studies of children's transport issues will be required in order to convince policy makers of the need for national intervention, and to provide the preliminary data for such intervention. Children's spatial mobility and transport needs are likely to vary considerably between different agro-ecological, cultural and socio-economic areas of the country (as well as in relation to age, gender, family socio-economic status and parental status). In such a larger-scale transport study focussed on production of comparative data for

different regions it would probably be necessary to incorporate rather more adult input (i.e., child focused rather than child-centred) for logistical reasons.¹⁰ Children, by virtue of their status, and educational and other family concerns, are usually restricted in their travel opportunities

Conclusion

As Mayo observes (2001), although children's participation in development agendas has increased, there is still much tokenism where children's voices are concerned. Even in so-called 'advanced' Western contexts, child participation in planning is relatively rare and limited in degree (see, for example, Barker 2003 regarding children's exclusion from participation and decision-making in a UK travel context). Edwards (1996) suggests that planners are wedded to a standard model of childhood rooted in Western nineteenth century thinking, whereby children are considered 'childish', passive and dependent and their opinions are thus not sought. Planning is about trying to reshape a world which is 'ordered and scaled by and for adults' (Cloke and Jones 2005, p. 315)—but to reshape it so that it also suits children is a task of massive proportions. Certainly, in a Western context, planners' and children's perceptions of what constitutes a good environment often seem to be at odds (Percy-Smith 2005). Matthews (2003, p. 114) has drawn attention to the street as 'a fuzzy zone' in which children's presence 'is seen as uncomfortable and discrepant by many adults': it is hardly surprising if some discordance of planning priorities emerges. This could well turn out to be case in Africa too. Inevitably, increasing participation—whether it brings in children or other groups—raises the potential of increased conflict, since this brings a wider range of views to the fore. The role played by facilitators in work with children is particularly sensitive and requires careful consideration: the power of the facilitators in this context is likely to be particularly great and will require regular review. Williams (2004) emphasises the political struggles inherent within participatory development and argues that the space for unintended consequences—both negative and positive—are always present. This observation presents a particularly salutary warning when we wish to work with children: their protection has to take precedence over other considerations.

It is important to reflect on the ways in which the groundwork for child-centred studies is laid in varying cultural contexts, and on the ways in which it is best presented to policy makers and planners (whose support is needed to ensure implementation of critical findings), without compromising the spirit of child-centred research. Working in a transport context arguably presented especially difficult hurdles, but our small pilot nonetheless produced clear evidence of the value of incorporating child-centred approaches. Much more work will be needed worldwide, not only in Africa, to reinforce the message in transport planning circles that children's needs and views in this, as in other fields, are vital to positive change.

One of the most significant challenges in an academic research context is probably that of local practitioner support. It is difficult to see how successful projects with children can be achieved without close collaboration with locally-based child focused NGOs fully committed to child-centred approaches and endowed with a core of well-trained field staff, unless the project respondents are very few in number (as in Cahill 2004). Academics themselves rarely have a pool of trained field staff available for projects. Although collaborative research enterprises between practitioners and academics have expanded substantially in recent years, difficulties often arise because the imperatives imposed by their organisational structures and funding patterns tend to differ, while financial pressures are common to both. Academics face research assessment exercises and suchlike from their funding councils which bring pressures to publish, whereas local NGOs are often very highly dependent on donor funds for maintaining the trained field staff they need to support their interventions (as discussed in Mawdsley *et al.* 2002, Mohan 2002, Porter 2003 re Ghana). Moreover, while both are usually committed to social

transformation, academics generally see their role as ‘interpreters, commentators and observers’, obtaining the ‘big picture’, whereas NGO activists are usually more concerned with achieving practical grass-roots change (Cottrell and Parpart 2006, p. 18).

Child-centred research studies are probably among the most challenging projects academic researchers in the mainstream social sciences will encounter. Nonetheless, children’s participation is a right, and if African countries are to meet the MDGs, it is clear that issues concerning children—including their mobility and transport needs—will have to be addressed more directly. If the potential for involving children in development planning in Africa is growing, the credit is due largely to international and local NGOs who are playing a critical role in pushing for greater attention to the issue and to children themselves who have shown what they can do, through their own commitment and efforts.¹¹ Academics’ research skills could arguably contribute substantially to this effort. As Cottrell and Parpart (2006) observe, the rewards of successful (academic-NGO) collaboration are many, but the challenges around different notions of change, processes and dissemination of findings are considerable. Fox (2006, p. 31) suggests that for activist-scholar partnerships to work, there must be ‘an understanding of the other, respect for difference, shared tractable goals, and a willingness to *agree to disagree*’.¹² This could apply equally to partnerships with children, but the power dynamics at work may make that agreement to disagree even more complex and difficult to achieve. The challenges to finding new, effective ways of working together—academics, children and NGOs—are substantial, but the rewards could be enormous.

In areas like transport planning, where technical priorities still regularly triumph over social concerns, vulnerable groups need particular attention and support. Although this paper has focused on the specific challenges associated with child-centred research, it has raised broader questions regarding the potential for research partnerships with vulnerable groups and for more collaborative research processes within transport studies. During our work with child researchers we have come to reflect on the shortage of participant-led or even adequately participant-informed research within the transport field in any age group, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, whatever the general participatory rhetoric around academics and practitioners ‘handing over the stick’. On the one hand potential research participants commonly have other priorities and, as (in some cases) the subject of numerous enquiries with no evident benefit, may exhibit little faith in its potential rewards. On the other hand transport researchers and practitioners are often reluctant to stand back from the research process: they have deadlines to meet, funders to satisfy, and professional concerns about data reliability. Moreover, the emphasis in transport studies is still commonly firmly on quantitative methods and large surveys. Partnerships of the type described in this paper involve both sides taking risks and, additionally, may raise antagonisms amongst external actors. Our experience suggests that getting political and technical stakeholders on board is critical to the process of change; understanding the local context is crucial. Above all, although handing over the stick takes time and nerve, it offers insights which we as professional researchers are otherwise unlikely to attain.

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Notes

1. Children—as Alderson (2001) points out—is an awkward word to cover teenagers. Nevertheless, it is used in the paper as a blanket term to apply to children and young people up to the age of 20. We do not use the term youth because, in a West African context, this can extend into the mid 30s, especially in the case of men.
2. The Research Assessment Exercise in UK and similar exercises elsewhere have led to university departments putting pressures on their staff regarding acceptable research areas. Until recently, for example, this has often militated against inter-disciplinary research.
3. The *Country Consultative Groups* were established to help shape the project by providing additional expertise (as well as for subsequent dissemination of findings). The aim was to select key partners who would need to be involved in helping to improve children's mobility and access. These varied but tended to include NGOs, government departments (transport), local government staff, transport union representatives and academics.
4. The children and NGO staff involved in the India project have plans to produce a book on their experiences.
5. Cape Coast University was once primarily a teacher training institute.
6. In India, with the participating NGO's assistance, children developed a set of criteria and then selected their representatives to participate in this project.
7. A police representative, for instance, commented how much she had learnt about children being harassed in the transport context, while the Minister for Roads and Transport spoke on a wide range of issues, including the role of parents and communities, the high incidence of children as traffic accident victims, the new Road Traffic Act, and the fact that society has not learnt enough about children's mobility needs and how they see the issues.
8. This may have been prompted, at least in part, by an NGO poster about adult imperialism on the wall of the meeting room.
9. Children should ideally select their own representatives to participate in the study (i.e., children with a range of skills and abilities to undertake the research and then take the findings forward). The Bhima Sanghas in Karnataka, India, have developed a reservation system to ensure potentially under-represented groups such as the disabled are included (reflecting reservation approaches utilised in government in India).
10. Since the first draft of this paper was written, the authors and associated collaborators have obtained funding from ESRC/DFID for a larger three-country study in sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana, Malawi, South Africa) which will help take this research forward. This study will incorporate both child researcher and adult researcher strands.
11. A recent review of Uganda's Participatory Poverty Programme, for instance, shows that children offer important insights into poverty issues and actually provide a more nuanced view of poverty than adults, emphasising related personal, emotional, spiritual and family issues, and a more positive perspective on fighting the factors that cause it (Witter and Bukokhe 2004).
12. Italics in the original.

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