

Public Development and the Development of Publics

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Jacqueline H. Fewkes (University of Pennsylvania)

How can public interest anthropology play a significant role in understanding the creation of a public? Anthropologists are often perceived as obstructionist in the development world. However, public interest anthropology creates a space where we can ask critical questions about the creation of a public, while participating in programs that engage us with those same publics. I had the chance to actualize this theory in 2001, while working as a volunteer consultant for a local branch of an international NGO, in the Ladakh region of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India.

The central case study for this paper describes the formation of groups called Children's Committees for Village Development. Development workers have created a new "child public" in Ladakhi villages throughout the region. NGO workers created these groups, in their own words, to mobilize children as "participants rather than aid recipients". These children were brought together as an interest group, and trained to protect what was perceived as their collective interests. Children's committees were conceptualized by local development workers in 1997, and implemented the next year. Today there are 36 children's committees in the region. The groups are made up of both male and female village children between the ages of five and fifteen.

NGO workers began committee formation by educating all villagers about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prompted an awareness of a "child public" within the village community. Having gained adult approval, and sparked children's interests, they then trained the children. There were two types of training. One was on what is called "Life Skills", which included processes such as analysis, planning, documentation, and management skills. These provided the practical structure for information training on development issues such as "Environment", "Education", and "Health". Often children were invited to a training camp for a few days, which involved lectures, activities, and games organized around these lessons. After education and training stages, the children were given a portion of money, and assigned adult mentors to encourage them to develop their own agendas and action plans. When they returned to their villages, the children were left to their own devices, although they are visited periodically by NGO workers who observe and advise.

While this structure may not sound effective, the results have been surprisingly so. Children's Committees in Ladakh have worked to clean water sources in their areas, collect litter, and conduct public health campaigns to educate their communities about health concerns such as polio, tuberculosis, and the dangers of smoking. Children in remote villages have organized tutoring programs which have increased adult literacy in their villages, and improved the school performance of the child members. They have organized fundraisers within their villages to provide school books and clothing for poor children, and helped fund pre-schools. Child committee members have also proven their ability to represent community concerns to government officials.

While the development issues children's committees tackle are often perceived to be the central "success" in children's committees, it is important to stress that the "Life Skills" training is in most ways more important both in terms of the efficacy of children's committees, and in the formation of a child public as envisioned by the NGOs. For example: in one case adult development workers were called back to a village by angry adults. The children's committee in this village had begun a campaign for environmental issues in their area. They had learned that washing clothes with detergent in the stream polluted their water, and tried to dissuade adults from doing so. When their requests were ignored the child committee members took action, going down to the river one afternoon and tearing up all the villager's clothes that they found drying nearby. Beyond the immediate problems this created, this was obviously a step backwards in "development" for both the children's committee and the NGOs. The failure was not, however, in environmental issues education, but in the "Life Skills" training.

The centrality of "Life Skills" training to the success of a children's committee, in terms of achieving development agency goals, highlights the way in which these groups act as sites of political socialization for their child participants. As an anthropologist, I found this to be the most curious facet of children's committee formation processes, responsible for some of the most socially significant outcomes. I mentioned before that one activity of child committee members has been the representation of community concerns in public offices and with government officials. An example of this type of activity occurred in one village when the children worked to improve their education.

It is important to understand a few facts about government schools in Ladakh to fully appreciate the children's initiative. Ladakh is considered a "punishment posting" for government school teachers. The climate is harsh, and the villages remote. Many teachers deal with this problem by extending their vacation periods beyond the allotted leave period; they simply do not show up to teach class for weeks on end, and their absence goes unnoticed in the bureaucratic tangle of the Jammu and Kashmir state government, which has many other more pressing concerns. The child members of one village tackled this problem with their "Life Skills Training". Analysis: they reviewed the situation, found their teachers lacking, and realized the government did not notice. They conducted research, and documented the outcomes. The end result was children's representatives walking into their district education office, and placing a file on the desk of the chief officer. The file contained a chart they had made, listing all their teacher's names, with daily attendance records for each one.

This type of activity, I would argue, represents the most significant role of children's committees. In an article on Dayak voluntary associations in Malaysia, Tan Chee-Beng wrote that:

[t]he functions of these new associations both complement and supplement the roles of traditional leaders (such as the village headmen) in adjusting to the state and to the market economy, both of which are impinging more and more on the lives of the indigenous

people. Communal associations are convenient and indeed necessary new organizations for enhancing group formation [...] and articulating communal interests in a communally stratified nation-state.

I would argue a similar case for children's committees in Ladakh. These groups function as political associations to enable children to deal with the state as a formal collective. In Jammu and Kashmir, a state with constant contestation of interest groups based on religious, ethnic, and national identities, children's committees have manufactured a new category of political participants. NGO workers have grown, over the course of the program, to recognize that the strength of children's groups involves more than village interests, and have now formed a bureaucratic structure for the committees that mirrors the governmental structure in the state; thus there are now Children's Committees for District Development.

The main force behind this "project of the nation" is international: the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child is presented to village communities as a piece of international legislation and used to teach children that they are a local common interest group across gender, class, and religious boundaries, definable beyond village levels.

This may support the national project, but seems at first glance to undermine local power structures. However, throughout the course of my research the data did not indicate that children's committee upset power balances in villages. Children's committee members certainly challenged the authority of some individuals, such as parents who were deemed to be beating their children "too often". Yet at no point did those which followed their "Life Skills" training challenge adult authority as a whole.

In fact children's committees seem to have a necessary relationship with the village structure. While some of their ideology, such as equal participation of boys and girls, might challenge traditional "values" as perceived by outsiders, none cross the lines. For example, in one village, a girl was elected as president of her children's committee, thus providing what appears to be a new type of female leadership. However, when activities called for participation beyond to confines of the village she would send boys from the committee. The reason given to NGO workers was that "it is hard for a girl to travel to new places".

More significantly, children's committees have ONLY been successful in villages. None have been formed in urban areas, and insurmountable formation problems have occurred with groups that were attempted in refugee communities. NGO workers explain that in villages children come to the group with strong social structures, the children's committee formation process is simply about making a place within those structures for the concept of a child public. Thus NGO workers feel that they are modifying or redefining groupings in rural communities when making a children's committee, but not creating new ones.

"Is there really a child public?"

Fully formed children's committees seem to fit many criteria for a "true" child public. They are run by children as well as made up of child members, and

their main motivation tool is the power of peer pressure. NGO workers only make contact approximately once a month during the summer. Beyond the idea of democratically elected leaders, children define the leadership roles: some have presidents, other have councils, and one children's committee even instituted a system of multiple "chairs" which represented male, female, and age sub-sections of the children's group. Field interviews showed that in villages where children received training over a longer period of time, they internalized the "Life Skills" concepts and explained instead of recited them.

Yet, behind all of these ideas of a child public exists a construction originating from a separate development public. These are evident in the dissemination of information about the UN Convention on Rights of the Child, training in democratic election processes, and prompting a world view centered on NGO defined "Life Skills".

Ultimately the question becomes, "is a created public a valid public" or "what defines a "true" or "valid" public". I believe that a public interest anthropology approach can prompt us to create better theory, by engaging with multiple levels of publics. We need, in anthropology, the conceptual tools to reach beyond a debate about the "validity" of these publics and examine the many different spheres of social/political significance they occupy. Discussing these issues in both the anthropological and development worlds can generate new ways of understanding culture, while impacting policy for program formation, replication, and sustainability. Thus we have the anthropologist as both critic and contributor.