

# Developing a "Child Friendly District" in District 4, Ho Chi Minh City



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## Abbreviations

CEDC	Children in especially difficult circumstances
CFD	Child Friendly District
CPFC	The Committee for Population, Family and Children
CRC	The Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRN	Child Rights Network
CRP	Child Rights Programming
HCM City	Ho Chi Minh City
HCWF	Ho Chi Minh Child Welfare Foundation
PC	People's Committee
PIC	Project Implementation Committee
SCS	Save the Children, Sweden (earlier called Radda Barnen)

## Foreword

This booklet aims to trace the development of the Child Friendly District (CFD) of District 4, Ho Chi Minh City (HCM City), from its earliest origins up to the present day. It is not an evaluation, nor is it a promotional or fund-raising brochure that paints an exclusively positive picture of the project. My mandate is to record the evolution of this experimental project as it has moved forward through a mixture of trial, error and success to the point that it has reached today. That is why I have decided to present the CFD story chronologically rather than thematically, with more emphasis given to process than to output. Whilst the content is almost entirely objective, I have injected, at times, some thoughts and comments of my own.

Research for this booklet included the reading of a vast number of project documents, such as annual plans, budgets, reports, project evaluations and minutes of numerous workshops and meetings. To put meat on these bones, I had several full days of discussion with Le Quang Nguyen, SCS programme officer for the CFD, as well as long interviews with Mr. Vo Phi Chau, the man responsible for the implementation of the project on behalf of the Committee for Population, Family & Children (CPFC)<sup>1</sup> of District 4, Mrs. Trieu Thi Anh Nguyet, project advisor and trainer from the Ho Chi Minh Child Welfare Foundation (HCWF), Mr. Nguyen Tien Dat, Vice-Chairman of the People's Committee of District 4 and Nguyen Huy Truong, a former member of the children's "core group" of the CFD, now assistant to Mr. Chau and trainee facilitator for children's activities.

I also met 9 members of the project's core group of children in District 4, all aged between 12 and 15, and all enthusiastic and bright youngsters, who exuded a level of confidence that is very rare to find amongst Vietnamese children of that age. Clearly the CFD was working for them.

One of these children managed secretly, skilfully and at high speed to draw a picture of me during our meeting. Although I am not 100% flattered by the result, I am definitely made to look a great deal younger than I really am. For that reason, and as a memento of the children's enterprise and talent, I have decided to include it here: →



I hope that the booklet will serve a number of purposes. The concerned programme officer of Save the Children Sweden (SCS), the project's funder and partner, told me that the CFD had generated a lot of interest amongst a variety of organisations and people, many of whom wanted to visit the project and/or discuss it with SCS, and that responding to these requests took up far too much of his time. This booklet can save a lot of that time by being made available to anybody who wants to know the history and development of the project.

More important, it can be useful to any government or non-government organisations that may be interested in creating, promoting and/or supporting a similar initiative, especially those that genuinely wish to give children the opportunity to contribute to the planning and implementation of activities that affect them. There is a lot to learn from the project.

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<sup>1</sup> The agency was previously called the Committee for the Protection & Care of Children (CPCC). It took on the added responsibilities of Population and Family from 2002. Throughout this text, however, we will call it CPFC.

## Introduction

District 4 of HCM City is a densely populated urban area of 409 hectares surrounded and criss-crossed by rivers and canals. It has 15 wards and 51 sub-wards, with a total population exceeding 200,000, of whom around 25% are under 16 years of age.

The district has 6 high schools, 16 primary schools, 18 pre-schools, a sports centre and a children's cultural house. It is one of the poorest and most polluted districts in the city, with many adults having unstable jobs and sources of income. Poverty and broken homes often result in parents neglecting their children, who sometimes drop out of school in order to find some form of employment, often on the street. This can put them at risk of delinquency in a city that has a high prevalence of intravenous drug addiction and petty crime.

Vietnam has a huge network of state and mass organisations that operate all mainstream services in the country. Most foreign NGOs and other international agencies wishing to promote new development projects or approaches in Vietnam make an agreement with one or more of these state organisations, providing them with 100% funding to implement these additional activities. It is extremely difficult, however, for such projects or activities to survive or have any lasting impact once the funding has been withdrawn at the end of the agreement period, because the government often has no sense of ownership, no budget and possibly even no desire to integrate them into the system.

Over the past decade or so, international development agencies have generated a deluge of constantly evolving concepts and techniques (each with its own ever-changing jargon), which have mostly never been practised or tested in their countries of origin and which their local partners are often obliged to learn in order to secure funding. Many are so contrary to Vietnamese culture or so complex that the only people who can be expected to adopt them are their foreign inventors. This is not to say that the concepts themselves are wrong, but often the way they are presented is more of a hindrance than a help to their acceptance by local government and mass organisations. It is therefore rare that such banners as "child participation" or "child rights programming" are applied in a way that goes much beyond tokenism.

The CFD was founded on three core principles, which were crucial as far as SCS was concerned. The first was that children in the district must have a voice and a practical role to play in the planning, implementation and monitoring of activities and services that directly affect them. Not just words on paper, but the real thing. The second principle was that there should be coordinated planning of these services and activities on the part of all concerned government departments and mass organisations.

The third principle was that the People's Committee of District 4 must be the legal titleholder of the project, with CPFC being the implementing agency. This was a change from SCS's previous way of providing support in the district, but made obvious sense if the CFD was to be some kind of a model for other districts to learn from and maybe apply in the future. There were some reservations about this plan from SCS's former partners, who felt that the ambitious idea of a child friendly district might become diluted, delayed and perhaps lost, if it was fully in the hands of local government. This commitment to local ownership also logically meant that all plans, decisions and activities must be carried out (with such support and training as was needed) by the district and that nothing could be imposed from outside.

It is a credit to the project that all three principles have largely been honoured since the very beginning.

Another reason why SCS was willing to go ahead with the CFD in district 4 was because of the confidence they had in the man who was chosen to lead it, namely Mr. Chau of CPFC. Sound working principles and structures alone are not enough. If Mr. Chau had not shown real interest in the core ideas of the project, there would have been no agreement and no CFD. The combination of a hard-working, motivated project leader, a determined, common-sense SCS programme officer, an experienced advisor/trainer and strong support from the People's Committee vice-chairman provided the essential human foundation for the project.

## **1. Origins and preparations**

### **1998 to 1999**

Most of the activities promoted and supported by SCS in Vietnam are based on their aim to ensure the practical application of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As a way of furthering this cause in a practical way, the idea of a “child friendly district” was born in 1998, and in November of that year a 3-day SCS staff workshop was held, one key item on the agenda being to examine and clarify the concept of the CFD with a view to producing a concrete plan of action.

A number of key long-term goals for a CFD were proposed during the workshop:

- ❖ All children in the district will express their views on issues that affect them, and all concerned adults and authorities will listen to these views.
- ❖ All adults and organisations directly responsible for children or children's services in the district will ensure that children's rights are respected and promoted.
- ❖ The general public in the district will understand and respect the CRC.
- ❖ National laws/policies for children and the CRC will be integrated into the district's normal action plans.
- ❖ There will be an effective safety net in the district for children in especially difficult circumstances (CEDC).
- ❖ All relevant organisations in the district will work together on the planning and implementation of child-focused activities.

In March 1999, a “discussion paper” was produced by SCS in Vietnam, indicating the origins and rationale for the CFD concept, as well as the first steps towards its realisation. Here are a few extracts from that paper:-

“SCS has supported individual initiatives with national or local organizations in a selection of different parts of the country. These initiatives have often produced models of good practice with children. ... However, ... it is clear that ... if fundamental progress is to be made in addressing the rights of children, it is important to ensure a more holistic, coordinated approach ... This would involve everyone in the same administrative area sharing the same information, training, resources and time to work in a coordinated fashion. Such areas, if they were developed, might be termed “Child Friendly Districts.”

“The concept of child friendly districts has its origins in discussions about the particular situation within Vietnam. Such an approach has never, at least to our knowledge, been attempted in a Vietnamese environment and has no direct parallels with Child Rights’ initiatives in other parts of the world. In fact everyone involved with the analysis up to now feels that it is important not to try and develop the concept at this stage.

“It is deemed vital that, if such a coordinated approach to child rights is to prove successful, it must develop systematically and in relation to the specific needs and situation of the districts that elect to take part. It can therefore only effectively be planned with the full involvement of the local authorities, mass organisations, adults and children who might be affected.

“.... Radda Barnen (SCS) is convinced that this idea of Child Friendly Districts is worthy of further discussion and development. To this end, we are contacting districts in rural and urban areas with whom Radda Barnen has had a successful working relationship in the past, to see if they might be interested in considering themselves as the site of a future pilot project.”

It is unclear why such a long time elapsed before the CFD was first discussed (in October 2000) with District 4, which was ultimately the only site where the project was piloted.

In the meantime (1999) SCS promoted and supported various new activities in District 4:

- ❖ a child rights strengthening project in Ward 6, principally community-level training, undertaken by HCWF (Mrs. Nguyet) – 1999 to 2001
- ❖ training in child abuse prevention in Wards 15 & 16, conducted by the Social Work Centre – 1999 to 2001
- ❖ re-integration of children in conflict with the law in Ward 4, implemented by the Women’s Study Department (of the Open University) – 1999 to 2000
- ❖ a project for the inclusion of children studying in evening classes into mainstream education, run by Education for Development.

Although these four agencies were SCS partners working in the same district, there was no cooperation between them. In some cases, they worked directly at ward level, without much contact with the district authorities. This was the exact opposite of the model that SCS wanted to develop for the CFD. The target groups were narrow, the activities localised and uncoordinated, and there was little or no involvement of the district.

## **2000 to 2001**

A meeting was held in October 2000 between SCS, HCWF and CPFC of District 4 regarding the idea of the CFD. This was the first meeting attended by Mr. Nguyen in preparation for taking on the role of programme officer for SCS, with responsibility for the CFD. This meeting was not a great success. Firstly, there were no bones on the idea, and so the discussion was inevitably very vague and lacking in substance. When the content of the project was introduced by the regional representative of SCS, it was in very absolute and idealistic terms: “all the rights of children should be fulfilled ... all children should go to mainstream schools” and so on, with the result that CPFC was very hesitant to make any firm commitment.

One positive outcome from the meeting, however, was the idea of creating a “Child Rights Network” (CRN) in the district, which would be the first step towards a more coordinated approach to the provision of children’s services. This was one of SCS’s core principles, as

well as a mechanism that could help CPFC carry out one of its own key functions, namely to ensure good practice and the respect of child rights in all statutory child-related services. The meeting ended with an understanding that CPFC would think about the idea of the CFD and the CRN before the next meeting to be held with the district People's Committee (PC).

It was on SCS's insistence that the project be discussed with the PC, which had always preferred that any future agreement should be made directly between SCS, the funding organisation, and CPFC, the implementing agency. Mr. Nguyen, however, was very emphatic that the project needed the support that an agreement with the PC would provide. Only then could the CRN be made to function and all concerned district organisations be involved in the project.

A tentative agenda was prepared by SCS for this next important meeting, which was held at the PC office on 15 November 2000. It was attended, amongst others, by the SCS regional representative, the PC vice chairperson, Mr. Chau (who had just joined CPFC), Mr. Dat (head of the district education department and future PC vice chairman), representatives of mass organisations and key members of the four local organisations supported by SCS.

SCS's agenda for this meeting was to present their ideas on the CFD, including the following priority activities:

- ❖ CRC training for all partners and interested officials
- ❖ training on logical framework analysis to help local leaders, organisations and other interested people in the district make realistic plans for CEDC activities
- ❖ a comprehensive baseline study in the district, which would form the foundation for the project agreement.

In addition, there was to be a group discussion on working principles, as well as to stress the importance of rights-based, participatory, community-based, gender-sensitive, inclusive and sustainable (!! ) approaches to working with children - a somewhat overloaded and over-ambitious agenda.

The meeting did not turn out quite as planned, but nonetheless was an important step in the process of developing the CFD. The outcome can be seen in the concluding words of the PC vice chairperson, Ms. Tran Thi Anh Nguyet:

"A child rights network should be run by CPFC ... . On behalf of the PC and as CPFC chairwoman I will take overall responsibility to oversee the network's activities. To make this network run efficiently, we need to have a specific programme and organise regular meetings. All members of mass organisations who attend the meeting today will be members of the network. ... First, you have to prepare a report on what your organisation has done and what your plans are for the coming months regarding child rights implementation in the district, and send this report to CPFC. ... Each organisation must have its own plan with detailed activities and objectives to contribute to the general objectives of the CRN.

"As for the CFD criteria, ... these issues will be discussed in the first meeting of the CRN. The tentative schedule for the regular meeting of the network will be on the 15<sup>th</sup> of every month at the CPFC office.

"At present, the district is focusing on education. ... Therefore the network's activities should focus on dealing with children who do not attend or have dropped out of school. CPFC will provide the network members with updated education statistics to facilitate your work."

SCS's proposal to conduct a baseline study in the district was rejected on the grounds that there was already enough information that could provide a foundation for any future agreement for a CFD. It was considered not appropriate or necessary to undertake such a study.

The first meeting of the CRN was held one month later, on 15 December, and chaired by CPFC. The CRN consisted of 15 government and mass agencies or institutions having child-related programmes or services in the district, some of the most important being CPFC, the Departments of Education and Health, HCWF, the Youth Union, the Women's Union and the Children's Cultural House. Most, but not all, members attended this first meeting. The functions of the network were first discussed, followed by the sharing of information on each organisation's work with children. The third item on the agenda was a discussion on how to create a "child friendly school"<sup>2</sup> and a "child friendly ward".

The second and third meetings of the CRN were held on 15 January and 14 February 2001 respectively, but the attendance was extremely poor. In reality, there was very little to talk about. No agreement had been signed for the CFD, no resources had been provided by SCS towards any new activities, and there was still no clear idea at all about what form the project should take. Although the network was supposed to come up with a design for the CFD, people were becoming tired of constantly theoretical and fruitless discussions about ideals and expectations which they considered to be unattainable (e.g. "total respect of all children's rights" and "fully inclusive education without discrimination" etc., etc).

The working principles and approach introduced by SCS were thus perceived to be much too absolute, especially when seen in the context of the serious problems that existed in the district and the severe lack of resources available. In addition, nobody seemed to know how to transfer the stated ideals and objectives of the project into a practical plan of action. It was clear that the early momentum of the CRN was disappearing fast. Equally clearly the benefit of close coordination between all government and mass organisations working with children in the district was not a sufficiently compelling reason alone to keep the network alive. And so, after a while, it simply ceased to exist. It remained dead for over a year.

One issue that had not yet been clarified was who should be the legal title-holder of the CFD. HCWF, which was perhaps SCS's closest partner in a variety of projects in southern Vietnam, and which had played a very active part in obtaining CPFC's support for the CFD, naturally thought that it would have a similar role in the new project as it had always had in projects supported by SCS, namely to be the coordinating agency, through which SCS routed its funding. SCS, however, believed that the project could succeed only if it were firmly in the hands of the district. So it also took some time for this management issue to be resolved.

Between 2000 and 2001, all four projects supported by SCS in District 4 came to an end, with the result that three of the four local organisations involved pulled out of the district. Mrs. Nguyet of HCWF, with her experience in child rights and other child-related training, was the obvious person to act as technical adviser/trainer within the CFD, once she had handed over her child rights strengthening activities in Ward 6 to the local authorities. The district CPFC was keen that she should have a role to play in the CFD, particularly since Mr. Chau was quite new in his job.

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<sup>2</sup> SCS had already worked with the Department of Education and Training in HCMC on the development of a "Child Friendly Learning Environment" in which a certain number of schools in the city participated. The first "Child Friendly School" to be developed in District 4 was Dong Da school



In the meantime no progress was being made at all with the drafting of an agreement and a plan of action for the CFD, because the entire concept was still in the air. Something had to be done to free the deadlock. So the idea was put forward: why not have a consultation with children in the district, and find out from them what are their priority needs? This could then lead to the identification of certain key problems, as well as various activities that could address those problems.

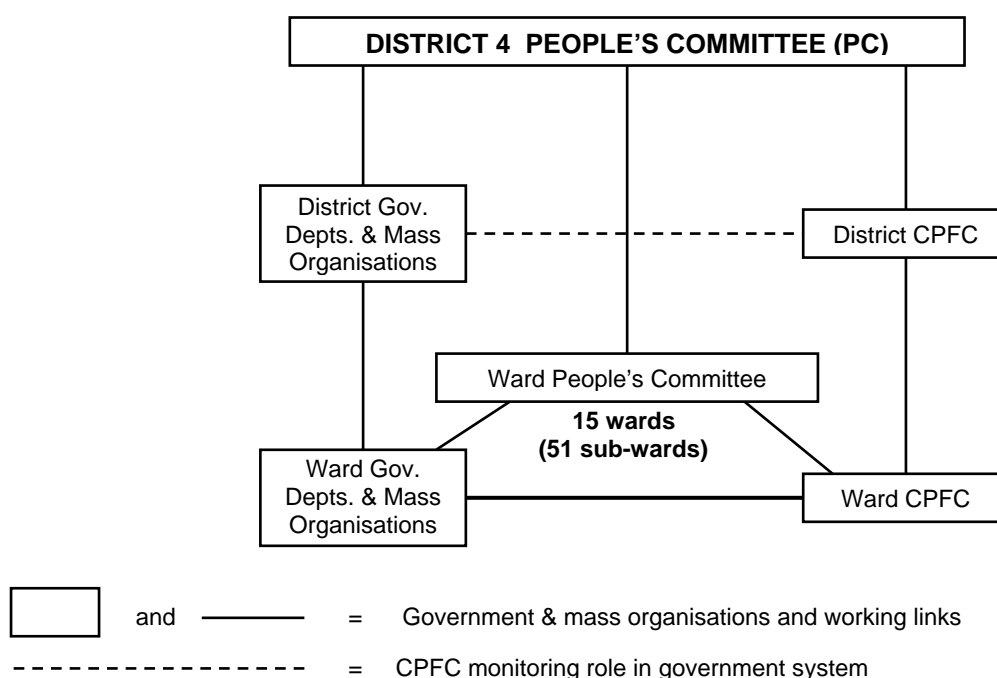
Everybody understood and liked this idea, because it made sense and was down to earth. It was then reshaped into an innovative plan to organise a “dialogue” between a representative group of children and the district leaders. SCS offered to provide financial and technical support for this dialogue. Suddenly the discussion became practical: Which children? How to select them? How to interact with them? What training should be provided and to whom? A series of planning meetings was held in order to answer these and other questions, and to lay the foundations for the dialogue.

At last the project had come to life.

## 2. The dialogue

Before describing the preparations for the dialogue and the outcome of this interesting event, here is an extremely simplified organigram showing how the government system in the district functions, particularly highlighting the place of CPFC.

There are 15 wards in District 4, each with its own People’s Committee, and each with a CPFC staff member who works in collaboration with a representative of either the Women’s Union or the Youth Union with regards to activities relating to children and the family. We will see later how this organigram expands with the arrival of the CFD.



It was decided that the CPFC staff in each of the 15 wards of the district would be trained to be behind-the-scenes facilitators for the workshop. This 4-day training, which was designed by SCS and conducted by skilled external trainers, was the first time that CPFC ward staff had learned some basic techniques of working with children in a participatory way. Of course it is not possible to turn mostly young and inexperienced adults into confident facilitators and communicators with children during one training workshop, but it was a good start to their learning process. After the training, there were two meetings between SCS, HCWF and the CPFC ward staff to help them with the problems they faced in working with the children that they had selected in their ward in preparation for the dialogue.

Inevitably some wards responded better to the challenge and were more active than others. One reason for this was the frequent changes in staff. Even in the short period of time between the training and the dialogue (2 months), two CPFC ward staff left their job, which meant that others had to cover for them. This excessively high rate of personnel turnover, not only in the wards but also at district level, has been a major headache for the project from the very beginning, and is also a permanent obstacle to the implementation of effective local government services as a whole.

On average around twelve children were initially selected by CPFC staff in each ward, although the numbers varied a lot from ward to ward. These children were the ones who participated most frequently in the regular activities organised locally by CPFC or the Youth Union. They were all school-going children, mostly from stable families. It cannot be said that these children were representative of all children in the ward, since none of them were disabled or working children or school drop-outs. It was a pity that one of the key objectives of the future project was not given more attention at this stage, namely to ensure the participation of CEDC. However, the timetable had been set for the dialogue and there was not enough time to start the difficult process of identifying CEDC and trying to integrate them into the existing groups of children in the wards. This was only to happen at a much later stage in the development of the CFD.

A great deal of time and attention was given to the process of selecting the children who would represent their wards at the dialogue, and then to select those who would be the key presenters. It was vital that the children, who had a very acute sense of justice, perceived this selection process as being fair. CPFC staff was now working with a total of around 180 children in order to identify their concerns, ward by ward, and this number had to be reduced to 75 (five from each ward) for the dialogue.

The selection process, which was first used for the dialogue and which has basically been followed for other events ever since, was very democratic. Firstly all the children were asked to identify the qualities that their representatives at the dialogue should possess. The list of these qualities, such as good communication skills, literacy, confidence, etc., etc. were posted on the blackboard. Then the children were asked to say whether they believed themselves to have enough of those qualities themselves. Let us imagine that two children put up their hands. Perhaps the others were too shy to vote for themselves; so they were then asked to say whether they had any friends in the group who had these qualities. In this way a number of children were selected. These were then asked to make a presentation in front of all children and staff, after which the children made a final vote for those who would represent them. This was a very fair way of dealing with a sensitive issue, but it also meant that CEDC were invariably disqualified, because they seldom possessed the required confidence or skills.

When parents first learned about the dialogue, several of them refused to allow their children to participate. Perhaps they did not believe that their kids had anything useful to say, but above all, they were afraid of the possible consequences. They wanted assurances that they would not have problems with the PC or the police if their children said something wrong during the dialogue. So official letters had to be sent to each family to reassure them that no action would be taken against them, whatever their children might say. This was still not enough for them. They told Mr. Chau that they wanted to attend the dialogue. He agreed to their demand on condition that they did not intervene at all during the proceedings.

The dialogue took place on 1/1/2002, after a full day and a half of work done by all selected children with CPFC ward staff acting as facilitators, supported by members of the district CPFC, HCWF and SCS. During this preparatory period, the children of each ward presented their concerns to one another, discovering that many of the issues raised were very similar, though often expressed in different ways.

They finally reduced the number of priority issues to six, and then divided themselves into six groups, each group facilitated by two elected children and each group having the responsibility to present one concern to the district leaders in a way of their own choosing (e.g. song, dance, role play ....).

The members of each group worked together to prepare their presentations.



After a rapid rehearsal, the stage was set for the afternoon session, when the leaders of the government departments and mass organisations of the district were assembled to hear what the children had to say. Two children were elected to introduce each of the six presentations, summarise its contents and request a response from the relevant official in the audience.

The six concerns identified by the children, with examples of each, were:

- ❖ **School**: too many and too high fees; too much corporal punishment and degrading behaviour by teachers; too demanding a curriculum that oblige children to attend evening tuition classes; fear of sexual harassment, causing children to drop out.
- ❖ **Recreation**: very few playgrounds or safe places where children can play; no organised activities except in summer holidays; no time to play due to school homework.
- ❖ **Environment**: dirty streets, markets, toilets, rivers and canals; no dustbins in houses, resulting in people throwing their garbage on to the street; pollution from factories; pavements used as toilets and also blocked by parked motorcycles and street vendors.
- ❖ **The family**: parents don't listen to their children; too much corporal punishment, abuse and neglect; children in poor families have to work instead of going to school.
- ❖ **Social problems**: too much gambling, drug addiction, theft, fighting on the street; children are lured into taking and selling drugs; drug addicts throw their used needles on the street; no help given to drug addicted children in the district.
- ❖ **Children's status in society**: nobody gives children a voice; parents divorce without thinking of the future of their children; street children are ignored by society.

After each issue was presented, the concerned government or mass organisation leader was asked to respond. This was most probably the first time that such senior officials of the district had found themselves in such a position. In addition, everybody, parents included, were genuinely surprised and impressed by the confidence and skill shown by the children in their presentations. As a result of this dialogue CPFC's commitment to the objectives of the CFD became much stronger, as they also discovered how much potential the children had, if they were given the opportunity to express themselves.

Some of the children's messages were so sensitive, especially those relating to their school experiences, that people may have been shocked that such issues had been raised in public, and some leaders may have found it difficult to come up with an adequate reply. Indeed, the responses of the district and other leaders were much as one might have expected, and not of any great significance here. These responses and commitments were subsequently discussed by the children in a separate workshop, and later re-examined to see what concrete results, if any, had come from the dialogue.

Much more significant was the fact that these senior officials were confronted by articulate children from the district whose concerns and complaints had to be heard, and to whom some response had to be given. It was the beginning of the process of showing people (as well as the children themselves) that children should not be treated simply as passive and unquestioning beneficiaries of services provided by adults, but that they had a useful and active role to play in improving those services.

### **3. The aims and working approach of the CFD**

In the months that followed the dialogue, there were several meetings between the three main partners (SCS, CPFC and HCWF) to prepare and plan the agreement for the first year. It was during this period that disagreements re-emerged and had to be settled regarding the legal ownership and management of the CFD. That is why the signing of the agreement was further delayed. However, based on the rationale described earlier, SCS insisted that the District PC would be the official title-holder, with CPFC being responsible for implementation and Mrs. Nguyet of HCWF being a member of the project management group as adviser & trainer. That structure remains in place today.

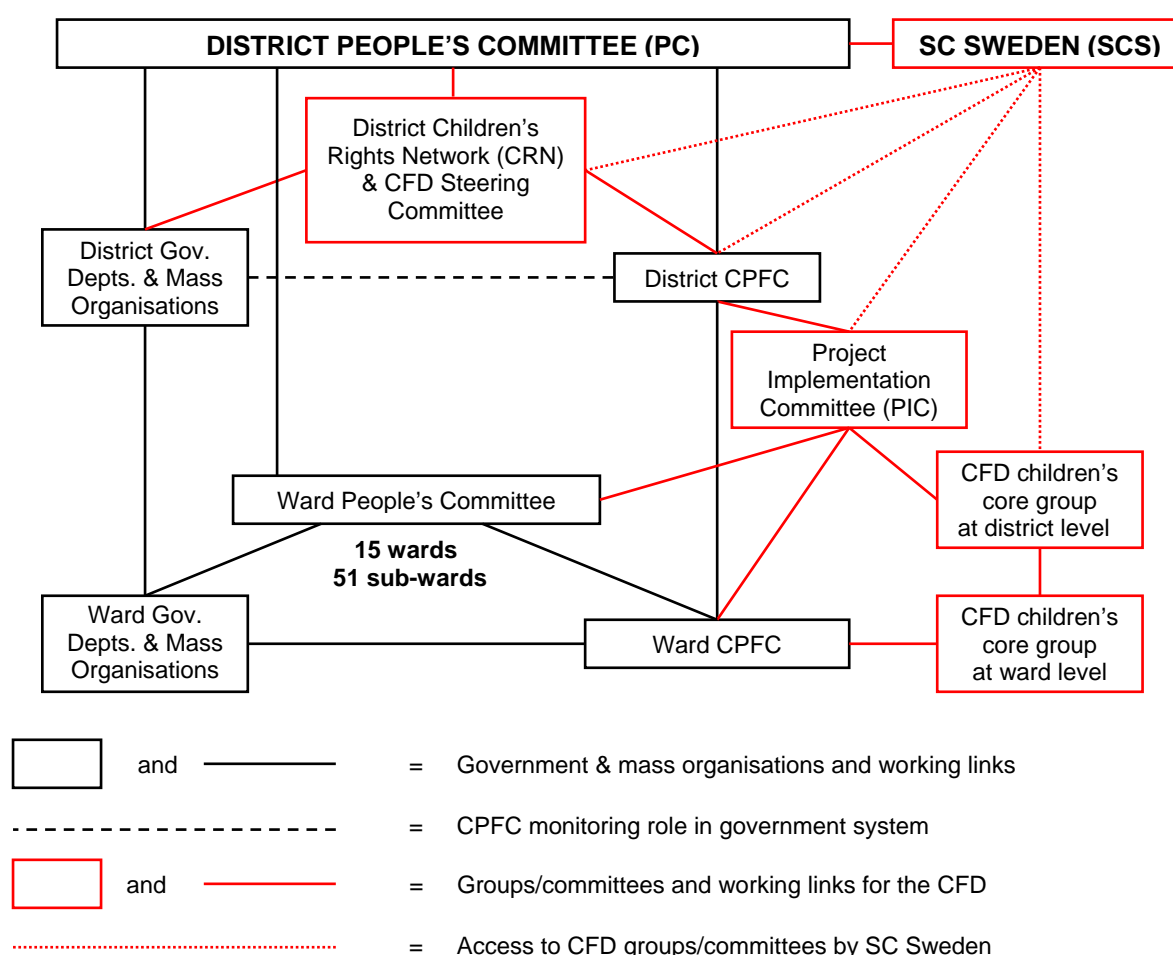
During these months of discussion, the aims and approach of the project also became more clear. The intention was not to establish a traditional, foreign-funded programme with its own separate activities, but to support and strengthen the district's existing services for children, by training and encouraging the concerned agency leaders to introduce child rights practices and the principles of child participation into these services.

A memo was written by Mr. Nguyen of SCS in February 2002, outlining the expected impact of the project, which, he hoped, would be a viable model for improving the quality of life of children in the district by ensuring that their specific concerns were included in the plans of the district. The government structure throughout Vietnam, he wrote, was both hierarchical and vertical, with very little collaboration between different ministries. Under the chairmanship of the PC, the CFD would support the Child Rights Network (CRN) comprising all those organisations in the district that provided services for children, in order to promote joint (rather than separate) planning and monitoring of their activities.

The CFD would also provide training and support to children to ensure their voice and active involvement in the planning, implementation and review of activities that affected them. Parallel training and support would be given to adults working with children, so that their enhanced awareness of child rights could result in better practices, less discrimination and more participative working methods in normal state services.

It was in the early stages of the first year that the working structure of the project was put into place. The Project Implementation Committee (PIC), comprising Mr. Chau (CPFC) and Mrs. Nguyet (HCWF), with active advice and support from Mr. Nguyen (SCS), had already worked together for some time, but now their roles were formalised in the agreement. All children at ward level who had already been involved in the dialogue, along with other interested children, became “children’s core groups” in the CFD. Under the guidance of the ward CPFC staff, some of these children were then elected (often self-elected) to join the “district children’s core group”, where they participated in regular training and meetings with the PIC.

Here is an organigram showing (in red) the new structures and links that were created to work alongside the existing network (in black), with CPFC again highlighted because of its pivotal role in the CFD. SCS kept itself outside but with free access to all key project organisms.



As can be seen from the organigram, CPFC’s network of responsibilities was considerably enlarged with the introduction of the CFD. In addition to their normal duties in the fields of population, family and children, they now had the task of developing children’s core groups

at both ward and district levels, as well as to coordinate and/or monitor all the planned activities for the year.

Furthermore, although the official chairperson of the CRN was the PC Vice-Chairman, in reality it was left to CPFC to plan and usually chair these meetings, which were scheduled to take place every quarter. Mr. Chau admitted that around 50% of his time was spent on CFD activities. “It took a huge amount of time”, he said, “to establish the children’s core group of the district and train them how to work as a kind of committee.” Then some children would leave the area or the group, and the process would start again.

The overall objective of the project, with minor changes in the wording, has remained the same from year 1, namely “to make children the first priority in the development policies of the district and to create the best environment for the holistic development of the child.” This is written into each annual agreement.

Since the CRN was considered from the outset to be an essential instrument for realising the first part of this objective, it was expanded to include not only leaders of all 15 government departments and mass organisations working with children in the district but also representatives of each ward PC. Although often delayed or not fully attended or even occasionally cancelled, these quarterly meetings have taken place quite regularly up to the present day. They are the only forum for discussing and deciding on the steps to be taken by different agencies to resolve a range of child-related problems that may have been identified during the previous quarter. The last CRN meeting of the project year is also an important part of the CFD planning process for the following year’s activities.

A few children from the dialogue attended the first meeting of the CRN. This turned out to be a mistake, because they were unprepared for the event and were greatly outnumbered by adults, most of whom clearly did not appreciate their presence. The idea that children should be part of the coordination group of district leaders was perhaps taking the idea of child participation too far. The experiment was never repeated.

Some members of the CRN participated less actively and regularly than others in quarterly meetings. So it would not be true to say that the project has received the full cooperation of all stakeholders from the very beginning or that the CRN now has a secure and permanent place amongst the district’s network of committees.

The most important event in the year for the CRN is the capacity-building and planning workshop, which is usually held in Dalat. Although the agenda changes from year to year, the workshop normally focuses on one or more key topics, for example how to include the rights or the voice of children in the planning and implementation of children’s services. Later in the workshop, the representatives of all the different agencies explain how they can incorporate these topics practically into the planning of their own programmes.

Participants also review the activities of the CFD during the previous year, and share their ideas on the priorities and plans for the following year.



With regards to the ward CPFC staff, they receive a variety of basic training from the project, which helps them to organise and interact effectively with their children's core groups as well as to understand and communicate to others the causes that the project is trying to promote. Work-related or CFD-related training is also given to the staff or volunteers of many other agencies (such as school teachers, Youth Union volunteers ...), i.e. to those people who are in regular professional contact with children and whose skills or awareness need to be enhanced in order to be more effective and better informed in their work.

Quarterly meetings between the PIC and the two key personnel of each ward (CPFC staff & Youth Union or Women's Union members) were also written into the first and all subsequent CFD agreements. These meetings are a vital forum for project monitoring, evaluation and planning, as well as for sharing experiences and learning from those experiences.

Now we come to the project's work with children. We have already discussed how the ward and district core groups were created initially, and how children are selected for special events. In reality the number of children in the district core group fluctuates considerably, since it depends on the number of children from each ward group who have the time and the interest (and the votes of their peers) to participate regularly in district level meetings and workshops.

The number of such children has certainly increased over time. For example, in the first year, the number of children in the district core group ranged from 30 to 80. In June 2004, there were 140. The project decided not to limit the number of children who could come into the district core group from each ward. Those wards with the largest number of representatives were generally the ones where the CPFC staff member was the most active and motivated. For example, in June 2004, 25 children from ward 6 participated in the district core group, whereas only 2 children represented ward 13. Ward 6 was where the child rights strengthening project had been run by HCWF for two years prior to the launch of the CFD. Interestingly, when the CPFC staff member for ward 6 left to be replaced by another person, the number of children in the core group dropped significantly, and now ward 6 has a very poor level of child participation. This shows the vital importance of the human factor.

In general, girls have shown more interest in the CFD and more commitment than boys, although some boys have been outstanding representatives of their wards. Of the 140 district core group children in 2004, 95 were girls (68%).

One important event is the quarterly meeting between the PIC and the district children's core group, which CPFC ward staff are also supposed to attend. The purpose, as in the meetings with the key personnel of each ward, is to share ideas and to review, evaluate and plan project activities. Thanks to the children's energy, sense of fun and interest, these meetings generally have a very dynamic atmosphere. When children participate, the proceedings are rarely boring.

During the research done prior to the writing of this booklet, a group of nine children from the district core group were asked whether they were able to choose the subjects that they wanted to raise during these meetings. When given the choice between "sometimes", "always" or "never", their unanimous answer was "sometimes". When asked whether they felt that their ideas were taken seriously, they had no hesitation in saying "always".



It is the responsibility of the district core group to consult the children of their wards before any important decisions are to be taken and to inform them of the plans made during these quarterly meetings. The willingness and methods used to do this vary from child to child, and so it is likely that some children do a better job of collecting and sharing information than others, in the same way that some ward CPFC staff are more conscientious than others. However willing children may be to pass on information to the children of their ward, it is true to say that most of them do not have a lot of time available to do this during term time, since their school classes occupy them for 5½ or 6 days per week, and many in addition attend evening tuition classes.

It was discovered quite soon in the first year that the only day during the school terms when most children were free to give their time to the CFD was Sunday. So except during school holidays, all meetings and activities involving the district and ward core groups have to be conducted on that day. This has been the practice throughout the life of the project, reinforcing the point made earlier that the project can only be effective if all adults involved are available and prepared to work at weekends and outside normal office hours.



The main event in the calendar of the district children's core group's is the annual 2 or 3 day workshop, which is usually held in Dalat.

This workshop's principal objective is to examine the outcome of the CRN workshop and the CFD plans for the following year, so that the children can add their own ideas and identify ways in which they can participate in the implementation of these plans.

This is a very popular event, and so the selection of the child participants is a particularly sensitive affair. Most of the children see this trip, which is a mixture of fun and work, as a kind of reward for their regular participation in CFD activities throughout the year. Since only one or a maximum of two children per ward can have this opportunity each year, some children are very disappointed if they are not chosen by their peers, and can drop out of the core group as a result. This is one of the many challenges faced by the PIC in its work.

Apart from these annual workshops and quarterly meetings, all children in the district core group have had the opportunity to participate in a range of different kinds of training, such as on child rights, communication skills, life skills, ... . Since it is a frequent occurrence that children leave the core group and others take their place, such training has to be repeated. This is true also of the training given to the ward CPFC staff, who are just as likely to move on as the children. As mentioned earlier, this is a serious and constant problem faced by CPFC, not only with regards to the CFD, but also in the management of their normal programmes at ward level.

There is no doubt that the children of the district core group have benefited from the project as much as the project has benefited from them. Quite apart from their participation in CFD activities, these children are often chosen to represent the district whenever there are city-level or nation-wide forums or workshops for children. The impact of these responsibilities and events on the children themselves cannot be over-emphasized. Each of the nine interviewed children recognised that they had learned a lot over the past two or three years, but



perhaps more important, they had gained a huge amount of confidence and belief in their own abilities thanks to the training provided by the project and the various activities that they had led. One 13 year old girl said that she had always been too scared to speak in public before, but now she was totally at ease when making presentations in front of anybody. Others said that the project had caused them to change their ideas about their future career, and that they were now interested in working with children.

A lot of importance is given in the CFD to ensuring that all stakeholders participate in the annual project planning process, which takes some months and is usually as follows:

1. The PIC draws up a suggested plan of action, based on experiences and evaluations during the previous 12 months and on discussions with the CRN and children.
2. The PIC then shows the plan to the district core group of children, who are asked to contribute their ideas, which are summarised and built into a draft plan for the year.
3. This draft plan is presented to the CRN, where district leaders are also asked to give their ideas as well as to participate in certain specific activities outlined in the plan. At the annual CRN workshop in Dalat, these leaders are also asked to make plans for their agencies' own programmes, incorporating the child-related practices and concepts that have been studied during the workshop.
4. The PIC draws up the final plan, which is the basis for the following year's project agreement.
5. Selected children from the district core group attend the workshop for children and staff in Dalat, where the output of the CRN workshop is examined and where the children decide in which planned activities they can have a leading role and in what way.
6. The detailed calendar of activities for the year is then drawn up by the PIC, with copies to all stakeholders.

It is important to remember that the CFD was, and still is, a pilot project. At the beginning, nobody had a clear idea how to design or implement it. So some of the processes and mechanisms described above took time to develop. They didn't all happen at once. In fact, there has never been any question of developing a five year plan, since each year's plans are influenced by the experiences, both good and bad, of the previous year. This formula offers a lot of flexibility, without compromising the core principles of the project, as described earlier.

One of these principles, however, namely the ownership of the project by the PC, represents a challenge, because this ownership is valuable only if it can be permanent. The temporary ownership by the district authorities of a temporary project is not the way that SCS wants the CFD to end or be remembered. The desired result is that the CFD ceases to be a "project", but is integrated into the normal programme of activities of CPFC and all concerned agencies in the district. That is why the emphasis of the CFD is on improving the existing children's services in District 4 through the capacity-building, training and regular coordination meetings of CRN members, rather than on initiating costly new activities that the district will almost certainly not be able to afford in the future.

Nonetheless, the 12 month CFD budget, paid by SCS, varies from around \$14,000 (in year 1) to \$18,000 (in year 4). This includes financial support to some new structures, committees, groups and even activities, created as a result of the project, many of which are crucial to its success, and which should therefore be taken over by the district in one form or another before the pilot project ends. To find a sustainable way of achieving that goal is the principal challenge facing the project in the coming two years.

## 4. Year one: 2002/3

The first year's project agreement was signed on 17 June 2002.

Two specific objectives were written into both agreements:

1. To strengthen the CRN and ensure coordinated planning of children's services.
2. To focus on the six concerns identified by the children.

With hindsight, it is agreed by all key people in the project that although the dialogue between children and district leaders was an excellent way to kick-start the CFD, the decision to base most of the first (and second) years' activities on the six issues raised by the children proved to be too ambitious. It makes perfect sense to consult children on government policies and problems that affect them, but it was perhaps too idealistic to build project plans, requiring important inputs by government agencies and mass organisations, almost entirely on the opinions of a group of children. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, these issues (school, recreation, environment, social problems, the family, children's status in society) were much too complex and vast for a relatively small project to address simultaneously.

The 2-day CRN workshop, facilitated by Mr. Henk Van Beers from SCS, was held in HCM City on 8 & 9 August 2002. The project plans and budget had been drawn up by the PIC two months earlier based on the results of the dialogue and after discussion with the CRN and key children. The first day's topic was an analysis of the participants' feelings about the notion of "child participation" and of what needed to be done to give children an active role in project planning, implementation and evaluation. On the second day, each of the 6 issues raised by the children in the dialogue was examined. The participants were asked to analyse the difficulties they might have in improving their services in relation to these issues, and how they could overcome these obstacles. This was followed by a "brainstorming" session, in which participants looked at the first year's project plan and added their own ideas to improve it.

Although the workshop concluded on a positive note, it had one major flaw. Since it was held in HCM City, participants were frequently interrupted or absent due to the demands of their normal work, causing serious disruption of the proceedings. There was also not enough time to do justice to the very wide-ranging agenda.

The plans that were made to realise the first specific objective mentioned above included renewed quarterly meetings of the CRN. One of these meetings was cancelled "due to administrative reform", but in the other meetings some important issues were discussed, such as school drop-outs, the clean environment campaign, children's recreation facilities and the provision of birth certificates for children whose births had not been registered at the right time. Although the progress in tackling these issues was slow, most members of the CRN began to see the value of these meetings, where decisions could be taken to solve specific problems of mutual concern that were identified by one or other government agency or mass organisation.

Not all wards had yet sent a representative from the PC to attend these meetings, nor were the leaders or representatives of all relevant government departments and mass organisations always present, although a large majority attended regularly. It would take time for CRN members to see the usefulness of the network.

With regards to the second specific objective of the first year, namely to focus on the six issues raised by the children at the dialogue, the plans, as mentioned earlier, were much too ambitious, with the result that some activities were cancelled or not as effective as they should have been.

For example, most of the activities relating to “school” were supposed to involve not only adults but also schoolchildren. In reality, these activities were carried out without the presence of any children, the reason being that they were “too busy” studying. Many people in the education services of the district clearly still had very traditional ideas about the role of children in school. As explained by Mr. Dat, the District PC vice-chairman, children are expected in Vietnamese culture to respect and obey their teachers, who feel that their pupils should not be allowed or encouraged to voice their concerns and complaints openly. He went on to say that improvements had been made in recent years, especially by introducing active learning methods in the classroom, but that a change in the teacher child relationship would take time.

After the dialogue, where some serious problems were raised by children concerning, amongst others, the behaviour of teachers, it was perhaps to be expected that the education authorities and schools would try to avoid a repeat performance. Nonetheless some important issues were raised during various meetings with the district education department, head teachers and teachers, such as flexible school fees, the reintegration of drop-outs, better teacher-child relations, the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream schools, ... .

With regards to the issue of recreation, it was planned that children should attend a workshop and a meeting along with staff and local leaders to focus on recreational activities and the creation of safe places for children to play. Once again, these events took place without the participation of any children. However, the Youth Union did respond positively by increasing its recreational programme for children in the wards, and a few more safe spaces were created on quiet streets and in factory compounds, where children could play football on Sunday.

The next concern of the children was the environment. A plan had been made for the children and the local people to clean up the rubbish around their houses. This plan had limited success, since very few people participated, and as a result the children quite reasonably said that it was not their job to do this work. They did, however, contribute their ideas to an awareness campaign that was carried out in all wards on such issues as garbage disposal, river pollution .... . A much more comprehensive and effective environment campaign would be conducted in the project’s third year.

“The family” was the fourth of the children’s six concerns, specifically the ill-treatment of children by their parents. Once again, it was unrealistic to expect that the CFD could bring about a profound and lasting change in traditional parenting methods in the amount of time that it was able to give. Nonetheless some child rights training was given to parents during the regular neighbourhood meetings at sub-ward level, although this activity was not well monitored, and its impact therefore uncertain.

The project also provided training in basic counselling skills to volunteers in all 15 wards, and supported “counselling rooms” in 5 wards, which were open at certain times on certain days. For a variety of reasons, these counselling services have been used by so few people during the lifetime of the project that they cannot be said to have had any significant impact on parenting so far. Here again, it requires time, expertise and good advertising to create an effective counselling service that is known, understood and available to all. The CFD simply

had too much on its plate during the first year to give the time that was needed to each of the issues that it had planned to address.

The children's fifth concern was the prevalence in their district of HIV/AIDS, prostitution, gambling, drug addiction and trafficking. In order to help the children to protect themselves against some of these dangers of modern life, especially in a big city, the project provided "life skills" training, which was started in the first year and has been repeated several times since for all new members of the core group. This 3-day training, which is much appreciated by the children, teaches them how to make decisions for themselves - for example how to say "no" to adults and friends who put pressure on them to do things that they know could be harmful to them, such as unprotected sex or experimenting with drugs.

With regards to the final issue raised by the children during the December 2001 dialogue, namely society's disregard of their views, the entire CFD itself was largely founded on the principle of giving children a voice as well as a central place in the development priorities of the district. In the first year the district core group met several times to plan and monitor activities, their ideas being transmitted to the CRN. Communication skills training for these children was also started, and has been continued in subsequent years.

It is possible that there were too many meetings and workshops with children on too many different issues during the first year, aiming to try and address the over-ambitious schedule of activities. But these meetings certainly gave CPFC in District 4 the opportunity to create a new and dynamic relationship with their young "constituents", and inevitably a much better understanding of most children's day to day concerns, even though the core groups at this stage did not represent the most underprivileged or marginalised children in the district.

From early in the first year, attempts were made to attract more CEDC into the core groups at ward and district levels, but with rather poor results. In September 2002, a meeting was held with 22 school drop-outs and around 10 members of the district core group, in which the newcomers were introduced to the CFD, and the outcome of the famous dialogue was discussed. They were then asked to outline their needs and aspirations, which could be built into the plan of action. Another aim was that they might become members of the district core group themselves, thus making it a more representative body of children. As it happened, they found it difficult to interact with the much more confident and articulate members of the core group, and did not provide any new ideas at all. A very few of them did continue to participate in the CFD in one way or another, but for a large majority, this was their first and last meeting.

Another obstacle to integrating CEDC into the district core group was the election process. The children who volunteered and were approved by their peers to represent the ward at district level were almost always the most confident and educated in the group, who also had the necessary time and interest to participate in CFD activities. For a variety of reasons, very few disabled, delinquent or street children, child workers or school drop-outs joined the children's core groups at ward level, and those who did were very unlikely to progress to the district core group. This was because they were almost always perceived by the other children and CPFC ward staff (and by themselves) as being poor ambassadors for their ward, whether due to illiteracy or to the fact that their lifestyle did not allow them the necessary time to participate in regular meetings, training workshops or other project activities. Clearly other ways had to be found to increase the involvement of CEDC in the project.

It was apparent during the first year that the participation of children was much stronger in some areas than in others. In some wards, where the local CPFC staff had received prior training and support and/or were particularly committed to the goals of the project, many children were actively involved in the core group, whereas in other areas, often suffering from a frequent turn-over of staff or a general lack of interest in the project, there was a very poor level of child participation. In some wards, children were encouraged to make decisions and plans, whereas in others they simply carried out the decisions made by adults.

It was also apparent that an effective children's core group required a huge amount of time to establish. Whilst adults in government services were regularly involved in project planning, implementation and evaluation, as well as in attending meetings, the members of the district core group of children had no such experience. The PIC found that they needed much more time than they had originally planned in order to organise effectively, with the involvement of the district core group, any activity in which children from all 15 wards should participate.

Much had been learned during the first year. After such a long period of preparation, negotiation and delay, it was good that the CFD had been launched. One key conclusion was that the project should not attempt to plan too many activities itself and expect others to comply, because that would counter the principle of local ownership. It was felt that the only way to achieve lasting results was to strengthen the capacity of the local government and mass organisations in the district, and encourage them to incorporate child participation, child rights and more child-focused activities into the planning of their own services.

By the end of the first year, it was clear that children had the ability and the interest to participate in the design and implementation of a whole range of activities that affected them. These activities, however, had been planned by the project and accepted, with a few modifications, by the different local organisations concerned. During the preparation for the second year, the PIC did not make a detailed plan in advance, but left it up to each government and mass organisation in the CRN, during and following the 4-day workshop that was held in Dalat in March 2003, to make its own plans for increasing the involvement of children in its activities. The project would then provide training and support in order to assist these organisations to carry out their plans effectively.

The purpose of this approach was to integrate the project more closely into existing local government structures, as well as to encourage a greater sense of ownership on the part of all concerned government agencies and mass organisations.

The agenda of this workshop was:

- ❖ To review the activities of the first year that were undertaken by all concerned local organisations relating to the six issues identified by the children during the December 2001 dialogue, with emphasis on analysing the extent, methods, benefits and difficulties of involving children in these activities.
- ❖ To make plans for continuing to address each of the children's six concerns during the second year (each government and mass organisation formulating and presenting its own ideas).

The workshop was once again facilitated by Mr. Henk Van Beers from SCS, and was considered by most CRN members to have been successful, although some people commented that most of the solutions found for the identified difficulties were too idealistic and general to be

of real use. A suggestion was also made by some participants on the final day that it would be better to have a Vietnamese facilitator in the future, so that the terminology and concepts used during the workshop could be more easily and quickly understood.

As mentioned above, the member organisations of the CRN had much more involvement than before in the project planning process. Indeed they were asked not only to make plans for their own programmes and services in line with objectives 1 and 4 above, but also to make individual proposals for relevant activities that might be included in the CFD project plan for the following year. It was perhaps rather too early in the project's existence for people to have a sufficient understanding of the issues and principles of the CFD to know which kind of activities were relevant and which were not. As a result the PIC received a few good proposals, which were included in the agreement for the second year, but many others which did not correspond at all to the criteria, and had to be rejected. This would be the first and last time that the different agencies in the CRN were asked to make plans separately during the workshop. Part of the learning experience.

Although the project tried to do too much during the first year, with the result that many activities were postponed, cancelled or not as effective as was wished, it did nonetheless record some important achievements:

- ❖ The CRN was re-established and met regularly in order that all agencies working with children might discuss and find ways of resolving problems of mutual concern.
- ❖ Several children gained a huge amount of confidence and self-respect from what they were able to learn and do in the project.
- ❖ As a result of the dialogue and other presentations or campaigns in which children participated, many people were surprised to see how talented children could be in presenting their ideas, and most (CPFC) personnel began to understand the purpose and usefulness of the project. This was a good start in the process of helping people from different local agencies to change their attitudes towards children.
- ❖ An understanding of child's rights had started to spread into all parts of the district.

## **5. Year two: 2003/4**

The project agreement for year two was signed on 15 June 2003, after approval by the CRN.

The specific objectives were:

1. To put greater emphasis on child participation, enabling local organisations to make plans based on the children's six concerns and other issues, and to integrate those plans into their organisation's own action programmes.
2. To help ward staff and volunteers improve their work with children by providing them with further/refresher training.
3. To enhance the involvement of the district children's core group in planned activities by providing them with further/refresher training.
4. To ensure that mass organisations and government agencies offer more opportunities to children to participate in mainstream activities.

A variety of activities were carried out during the project year, including the separate quarterly meetings of the three main groups of stakeholders: the CRN, whose meetings were

chaired by the PC vice-chairman or CPFC head, the children's core group of the district and the local ward staff, the meetings of both groups being chaired by the PIC.

In August, the PIC organised a 2-day workshop for all ward staff and children from the district core group. During this workshop, feedback was given on the CRN workshop (in March) and quarterly meeting (in June), with emphasis on the importance and techniques of ensuring the active involvement of children in the CFD. The plan of action for the year was then presented, so that groups of children and adults could work together to decide in detail on the children's role in these activities.

This was the first time for many children and local staff to work together in a way that permitted children to express their opinions openly. The participating children found this to be an experience that made them feel respected and built up their confidence, whilst many of the adults were impressed by the children's ability to express and stick to their ideas.

The main event of the second year was the forum of high school children, which took a lot of time and preparation to organise. The idea was born out of the original dialogue in December 2001, when one of the six groups of children presented their concerns about education.

The aims of the forum were:

- ❖ To enable children from the six high schools in the district to express their views openly on issues and decisions that are traditionally the sole responsibility of adults.
- ❖ To help education department leaders, school principals and teachers in the district to have a better understanding of the concerns of children in their schools, and to show them that school children, by presenting their ideas and problems, can play an active role in the planning and improvement of the education service.

Preparation for this event on the part of the PIC included a short training for concerned teachers on child participation, including techniques for the democratic selection from each school of four children to represent each class, as well as the selection of group leaders, taking into consideration gender balance and social diversification. Not all teachers unfortunately attended this training. So the forum was delayed by a few weeks in order that more support could be given by CPFC during the preparatory phase.

The overall responsibility was in the hands of the district education department, who made it clear that they wanted the forum to include not only the concerns of the children regarding their school but also their duties. School principals and teachers had the responsibility for organising their own schools' input, based on the training they had received and the required procedures, especially with regards to the selection and support of the selected children.

The child representatives from each school, with guidance from their teachers, drew up a questionnaire to be given to all the children in their school, asking them to identify things of importance to them relating to their school (likes, dislikes, anxieties), and then to say what they themselves and the school or education authority might do to address these concerns.

Once that was done, they met to collate and note the results of the questionnaires, and to categorize them into certain themes, such as school infrastructure and materials, the learning environment, the school curriculum, teacher-student relations and teacher-parent relations, etc. These categories were then ranked in order of priority, based on the number of responses

and the degree of urgency. After verification of some of the information given in response to the questionnaires, the children then had to choose the best way to present them, such as a lecture, role play, drawing, ... .



The forum took place at the political training centre of District 4 on 9 September 2003. On the day before, the 96 chosen children of all six schools worked together, under the watchful eyes and guidance of teachers, to group and prepare their presentations in a coordinated way, to select two amongst them to be the main facilitators and to agree on a message that would be given by them all to the leaders of the district.

On the following day, a large number of district leaders, amongst other invitees, were there to see the children's presentations, which were divided into six different themes, each one being introduced by the two child facilitators and staged by the concerned group of children. The children had chosen several different methods of conveying their messages, including drama, poetry, drawings and straightforward speeches.

Here are the main issues raised by the children, sometimes repeated under different banners:

1. **Facilities & infrastructure:** children's learning aids are insufficient or broken; there is poor lighting and ventilation in many classrooms; school desks, chairs, blackboards are often left unrepaired; the playgrounds are too small; school canteen food is too expensive; the toilets are dirty and often without water.
2. **The learning environment:** the amount of time that children have to study - in the classroom (including Saturdays), doing homework, in private tuition - is too much; there is not enough time to relax or play sports or do any hobbies; teachers beat children unfairly.
3. **Safety:** it's dangerous on the road because nobody follows traffic regulations; outside people try to exploit, corrupt and steal from school children; schools should provide sex education; teachers deal out too many long or severe punishments in school; school food should be better and more nutritious; the school health insurance is too expensive.
4. **Child-teacher, child-child & parent-child relations:** some teachers force children to have private tuition; many punishments/detentions are unfair; parents do not listen to their children and force them to study excessively; older children often bully younger children.
5. **Environment:** Everybody's health in school is endangered by factory pollution; toilets are dirty and smell bad; playgrounds are almost bare of trees/plants and often covered with children's litter; canteen food is unhealthy and expensive.
6. **Child participation:** children want to take part in leisure/sport/camping activities and make new friends; children want teachers to read or explain to them more about real life.



In many cases, the children suggested what they could do and what the authorities could do to address these issues, along with a recitation of their duties as children. They finished with a poem, which told of their desire to be free of all school classes and homework on Saturday and Sunday, so that they could have time to enjoy themselves.

Here are some of the responses that were given at the end by several district leaders and a school principal: the government wants to provide the best learning environment to all school children; physical punishment in schools is not encouraged or condoned by the education authority; pupils should report any serious concerns to the school management; children must be polite to their teachers and obey school regulations; health insurance is quite expensive, but a very important protection for school children; today's students have better school facilities than they did before, due to the government's big investment in the education sector, ...

A few months later, around thirty of the participating children (from four of the six schools) were asked by the PIC to come and give their feedback on the forum. It was discovered on that occasion that in some schools several of the "most sensible" children had been selected by teachers or the school principal rather than elected by their peers to represent their class at the forum, and that some influence was exerted on the content of the children's messages. Whether due to a fear that the children might say things which could cause embarrassment or to the very traditional teacher-child relationship that is prevalent in Vietnam or both, it is not surprising that teachers felt it their duty to intervene in order to ensure as positive a result for their school as possible. Nonetheless it is likely that some teachers and principals felt vulnerable, even criticised, during the presentations, especially when the children repeatedly raised the issue of corporal punishment.

The main visible result of the forum, as reported by the children, was that most of the broken furniture and fittings in the schools were soon repaired or replaced. Little or no change was reported regarding the teacher-child relations or other issues that were raised. It will inevitably take a long time for traditional practices and beliefs in education to change and for school authorities to understand that their students, if given the opportunity and responsibility to organise and present their concerns and suggestions, can help them to improve their service.

This forum is a good example of the way in which the project functions, and is typical of all the CFD's main activities which require the participation of children. "Child participation" is an expression which sometimes conceals the amount of careful planning, training and support that is required to make it happen. The above account does not include all the meetings that were held or all the planning details that preceded the event, without which nothing of any value could have been achieved. Even if the result cannot be considered a complete success, the voice of a well prepared and articulate group of children representing all high schools in the district was heard by leaders and decision-makers in a forum that was under the official auspices and responsibility of the education department. That was an achievement in itself.

Another important part of the year's calendar was the 4-day CRN workshop, which was held in Dalat at the end of May 2004, and which was this time facilitated by Mr. Chau and Ms. Nguyet of the PIC. The intention was to introduce the concept of "child rights programming" (CRP) as well as the "grassroots democracy decree" during the first half of the workshop. CRP is a rights-based (rather than needs-based) method of programming. It is based on the notion of governments and service-providers as "duty bearers", and of children as "rights holders" having a central role in the planning of activities and services that affect them.

During the project's second year, Mr. Chau and Ms. Nguyet had been sent by SCS on a CRP training course lasting several days, and so they planned to present this approach during the workshop. The aim was to encourage the district to adopt CRP in its child-focused activities. However they discovered that it was very difficult to make a presentation of CRP in a way that could be easily absorbed by the CRN members, since in reality it involved a whole series of mechanisms and procedures that required a lot of time to understand, learn and apply. So after less than half a day, CRP was dropped from the agenda.

The grassroots democracy decree, which was introduced by the government in 1998, has never really been applied successfully throughout the country due to insufficient awareness-raising, training and support, as well as an absence of legal enforcement. This decree aims to ensure local governance success through the participation of the people in the planning, monitoring and delivery of public services, thus enhancing the accountability of governments at the provincial, district and commune level. Its central message is "be informed, be consulted, participate, monitor, benefit."

Since the grassroots democracy decree was a national government policy, not imported, and corresponded perfectly with CFD's aims, it was felt that it could be a good way of furthering child participation in the project. Although not specifically geared to children, the decree certainly does not exclude children, the core principle being that services can be improved only if the concerns and ideas of their users are systematically solicited, discussed and built into the planning process. The only users of the primary and secondary school service are children; hence the obvious relevance of the decree and of such events as the children's forum.

After an introduction and discussion on the grassroots democracy decree, the workshop then focused on plans for the following year. The main topic was how to facilitate the access of CEDC to all basic services and how to reintegrate marginalised or delinquent children into the community. CRN participants were asked to apply the principles of the decree in their planning and implementation, giving particular emphasis to CEDC. Finally, the plan to conduct an in-depth, district-wide survey on CEDC in the third year was discussed and agreed.

Soon after this workshop, 38 members of the district core group of children and 16 CPFC staff were invited to a workshop with the PIC, also attended by Mr. Nguyen of SCS. The agenda was to discuss the outcome of the CRN workshop in Dalat and to discuss the project's objectives and plans for the following year, especially those relating to CEDC. The children were then asked to give their ideas and to identify the ways in which they could participate in the activities. By this time, the PIC's method of working with children, as described by Mr. Chau, was no longer to tell or advise them what to do in any given situation, but to describe the problem and the objective, and then ask them to work out for themselves what to do, how to do it and specify what help they needed from adults.

Many other activities were carried out during the year in addition to the regular refresher or further training of core group children, the ongoing training of local ward staff and a workshop on the experiences and difficulties in the counselling service supported by the project. The Children's Cultural House provided training to 38 people responsible for managing the small libraries in the sub-wards, followed by a brainstorming on the problems they faced in providing this service.

The Youth Union, in addition to its ongoing struggle to create more safe playing areas for children, facilitated the participation of core group children at the ward level in the produc-

tion of the local newsletters in each sub-ward. Children were encouraged to collect interesting news/information in their localities and to illustrate the newsletters, giving suggestions on how to improve their appearance, content and distribution. This activity continues today, with many children helping the Youth Union with their local newsletter. The district sports centre cooperated with the project by arranging a training course on “how to organise outdoor activities for children” for 126 people working with children in different parts of the district.

Unfortunately, though, several scheduled activities did not in fact take place, and many of the plans made by CRN agencies for their own programmes also did not materialise. It was made clear to all members of the CRN at the start of the first year that SCS would only provide funds for training and capacity-building, in order to develop the knowledge and skills of the staff of concerned agencies and of the children (predominantly those in the district core group). Nonetheless some leaders were confused about the CFD. On the one hand they were being encouraged to include more child-focused activities and more child participation in the plans for their agencies’ normal programmes, but on the other hand, they were told that the project would not fund them to realise these plans. This logically meant either that these activities should not require any extra budget or that money would have to be found from somewhere else to pay for them.

At the same time, the project did occasionally provide funding for the implementation of a specific activity, such as the district’s counselling services. In addition, the CFD had created some new structures and groups in the district, such as the CRN and the children’s core group, each of which required financial inputs. It was also evident to all that the annual CRN and children’s workshops, which were a key part of the project’s strategy, required a significant investment of money.

So the message about funding was perhaps unclear, even contradictory. It is possible that people (including the author of this booklet initially) had some difficulty in distinguishing between the project’s two planning agendas, namely:

1. **Plans for project activities:** training and capacity-building workshops/meetings with children, the CRN, CPFC local staff and other district or ward personnel, as well as some relevant CFD activities proposed by members of the CRN (*financed by SCS*)
- and*
2. **Plans for mainstream activities:** approaches/activities relating to child participation, child rights etc., studied by the CRN during CFD workshops/meetings, that should be integrated in the district’s mainstream children’s programmes (*not financed by SCS*).

Given the rapid influx of NGOs and other institutional donors into Vietnam in the last 10 to 15 years, and their evident readiness to provide 100% funding to their local partners (usually government or mass organisations) for particular activities or projects, it was natural that some agency leaders in the CRN should expect that funds would be provided to implement the plans that they had been asked to formulate during and after the workshop. When they discovered that these funds were not forthcoming, it is likely that a few of them may have lost some interest in the project.

Sometimes agency leaders would send their plans to the ward for implementation, but without the extra funds that were required, with the result that many of the concerned activities were not carried out. In other cases, since they were not formally instructed by the PC to in-

tegrate these plans into their mainstream programmes, and had no extra budget to implement them, they had to abandon the activities.

There were other causes for concern as well: the involvement of CEDC was still extremely limited; the project had still not yet made a significant impact on families in the community; the problems of drug addiction, pollution and lack of safe playgrounds remained largely unchanged, even though some efforts were being made to address them.

There was disappointment also because the workshop for school principals and vice-principals on the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream schools, which was in the plans for the second year, failed to take place. There was clear resistance to such inclusion from the education department, which meant that the issue would be abandoned, temporarily at least.

However, despite these obstacles, the project was definitely gaining momentum. The children's core group was becoming stronger and more confident all the time and there was a growing belief amongst most CRN members in the project's objectives and principles, because there were more and more practical results to see.

Lessons were being learned all the time about what should and should not be attempted in the CFD. The PIC, with advice and support from SCS, was learning that it was better to carry out a few key activities well than to attempt to do too many things which might be unsuccessful due to time constraints. Even though Ms. Nguyet of HCWF was working full-time for the project, Mr. Chau had many responsibilities other than the CFD, and the ward staff, who all had other jobs to do in addition to their CPFC responsibilities, could not be expected to perform well, if overloaded with work.

## **6. Year three: 2004/5**

The third project year ran from July to July. For the first time, the project did not specifically aim to address all six issues raised by the children in the 2001 dialogue. The objectives were:

- ❖ To promote and accelerate the grassroots democracy decree with specific reference to the participation of children, especially CEDC.
- ❖ To facilitate children's access to basic services, especially CEDC.
- ❖ To enhance the capacity of local government and mass organisations with regards to the propagation of child rights in the community.
- ❖ To ensure that concerned CRN agencies allocate sufficient resources to implement their planned child-related activities.

This was the year of the Congress (held once every five years), and a lot of time was spent on preparations, which took time away from the project. As a result of the elections, there were many changes at all levels in the government, and so the PIC had to inform all concerned newcomers about the project and provide them with training on the CRC and other issues.

Many activities were conducted during the year, but two events stood out from all the others, namely the children's environment campaign and the survey on CEDC in the district.

The environment campaign was a huge undertaking carried out by children, with support from the PIC and local staff. Its purpose was twofold: firstly to raise the local community's

awareness on how to keep their environment clean and secondly to show how the grassroots democracy decree could apply to children, by being a practical example of children's participation in mainstream activities of the ward. This was by far the project's most ambitious and comprehensive activity to date.

During the planning workshop for the third year, the children's core group of the district had already offered to play the key role in the campaign. The aim was to assemble as many people as possible in each of the 51 sub-wards in order to introduce them to the CFD and to make a presentation on how to create a clean environment. In addition, the campaign would be taken to 25 schools in the district.



After numerous planning meetings and training sessions, the children set about producing many of the materials that would be used during the presentations. A schedule was made for all sub-wards, based on the dates of their regular neighbourhood meetings, as well as for all 25 schools. Two children were responsible, in each place, for making the presentation in front of all those people in their local community who attended. In most cases, due to the special nature of the event, a large number of people turned up, mostly adults.

It all ended on the evening of 7 May 2005 with a big exhibition, which turned out to be an excellent conclusion to a long, extensive and mostly successful campaign.

The PIC's third year annual report contains rather a good description of the preparations, execution and results of the campaign. Here, with some editing, it is:

"Preparations for the campaign included three training courses on communication skills for 96 children. Children in the district core group then participated in the design of the communication tools. This included their comments on the CFD handbook and leaflet, as well as on the environment poster which was painted by a member of the core group. They designed and made a CD, which featured a speech, songs and poems about the project. 50,000 CFD leaflets, 1,000 CFD handbooks, 1,000 environment posters, 30 banners and 80 CDs were distributed during the campaign.

"A job assignment meeting was held for children in the core groups of all 15 wards, who volunteered to help with the environment presentations as well as to encourage their families and neighbours to attend the big event in their sub-wards.

**"The children impressed the adults present with the confident and articulate manner in which they presented the environment poster.**

"The campaign day on 7 May 2005 at Khanh Hoi Park was very successful, attracting the attention of many adults and children in the community. It helped to make the project better known and to spread awareness about the importance of a clean environment.

“The outcome of the campaign in 25 schools was not as good as expected, because very large numbers of students were present, with insufficient time allowed for the presentation. The results were better in the 51 sub-wards, thanks to the strong collaboration between the local authorities, sub-ward committees, staff and core children, as well as to clear job assignments and rapid assessments after each meeting.

“Following the campaign, many people agreed that the children’s ideas were very realistic and that steps should be taken to improve the cleanliness of their communities. Above all, people were surprised by the children’s knowledge and communication skills.”

The project was given added exposure and credibility during this period due to a 30 minute television documentary (VTV) that was made on the CFD, showing the environment campaign in full swing, as well as other project activities. This helped to make people believe (even if it wasn’t entirely true) that not only was the CFD endorsed by the district authorities but that it was also an integral part of their mainstream plans and programmes.

Another positive but unexpected result came from the campaign. Local people learned that they could go to CPFC, if they needed help in connection with their children, such as with the provision of birth certificates or if they wanted to report on possible cases of child abuse in their neighbourhood. Indeed during and after the campaign, CPFC, either locally or in the district office, received many more visits from parents than usual.

*Having learned about the CFD during the campaign, a father came to the CPFC office one day to say that his 13 yr old son had been arrested at home for fighting on the street, and had been sent to a young offenders’ institution. Both parents felt that he did not deserve such a punishment, and were concerned also because the boy had asthma.*

*CPFC discovered that the correct procedure should have been to issue a warning only, and to leave the child at home under supervision. So they contacted the police of the ward, who arranged for the child to be sent home.*

One of the hopes of Mr. Chau was that people, especially parents, who had been impressed by the children’s sense of responsibility, knowledge and skills during the campaign might change their attitudes a little, and begin to include children in their own discussions on day to day problems that concerned them all. Surely the more that children showed their worth, the more likely it was that this would happen.

The second major event of the year was the survey on CEDC. The intention was to complete this survey in time for the planning of the following year’s activities, because despite some effort having been made to encourage CEDC to join in the activities of the CFD, there still had not been much success by the end of the third year.

The survey was conducted in five wards which were considered to be representative of the district as a whole (1 well-off ward, 2 average wards and 2 poor wards) and where the local authorities and mass organisations could be relied on to assist in the research process. The target groups were CEDC under 18 years of age living in the district and their families.

The research focused on measuring the extent to which children’s rights had been fulfilled in relation to education, health care, recreation and participation. It also analysed the potential of children, families, communities, mass organisations and government agencies at district and

ward level to promote child rights, and tried to identify the ways of supporting them in this task, with special regard to the rights of CEDC.

The survey, which was carried out in a participatory way with the active involvement of children and local people, was conducted by the Social Development Research Centre (SDRC) with support from the PIC and SCS.

The conclusions were:

- ❖ The situation of CEDC has been taken seriously by the district authorities, and mass organisations have shown their concern by providing some support to them.
- ❖ Staff in charge of children's services and programmes at district and ward level have limited information on policies relating to CEDC.
- ❖ Data on CEDC has not been updated by CPFC, and there is insufficient sharing of information between the district CPFC and the wards.

The main recommendations were as follows:

- ❖ There should be more public information campaigns in the community on the Law on the Protection and Care of Children (revised and promulgated in 2005), the CRC and good parenting skills (especially for parents of CEDC).
- ❖ A handbook of children's services should be produced and given to every household.
- ❖ A local network of child care and protection volunteers at district level and sub-ward level should be developed. Along with local staff, they should receive training in child rights, communication skills and basic social work methods, and then be given the necessary time and support to carry out their work.
- ❖ The counselling service in the district should be reinforced, and counsellors should receive ongoing training to upgrade their skills.
- ❖ A place should be identified, developed and equipped by the local authorities in each sub-ward where children can play safely, learn and develop their creativity. The children should be free to decorate it themselves.

The survey was a serious piece of work, and its conclusions and recommendations were an important foundation for the planning of year 4. A workshop was held to inform district leaders, local staff, children and the community about the research findings and to ask them for their comments and ideas. These turned out to be very similar to the recommendations listed above, thus reinforcing the conclusions of the survey.

One interesting development this year was the PIC's decision to invite a boy and a girl, who had left the district core group on reaching the age of 18, to help them facilitate discussions and workshops during their free time. One of these youngsters would be employed in the fourth year to work full time in the project.

Another important event was a workshop, organised jointly by the PIC and the district justice department, focusing on the problems and solutions regarding the issue of birth certificates to the 243 children in the district whose birth was unregistered. As a result of the workshop, the Youth Union worked with the Law University, which was located in the district, and motivated several wards to start the process of providing birth certificates to these children. 22 certificates were issued by the end of the third year. The project was determined that this process would be accelerated in following years.

During the course of the year, the idea of a Child Friendly City, proposed by Unicef, was developed and discussed at a city-level workshop in HCM City, where Mr. Dat, the PC vice-chairman of District 4, was invited to make a key presentation on the CFD, which was (and still is) the only existing practical example of the concept.

In addition to the project's normal quarterly meetings and annual workshops, further discussions were held to try and improve the counselling services in the district which were still in difficulty for a variety of reasons. Five counsellors were sent on a 5-day training course in order to upgrade their skills.

To give an idea of the rhythm of work undertaken in the project, here's a copy of the PIC's plan of action for the last quarter of the project's third year (2005):

Date	What	Who	Where
12/05	Meeting to discuss solutions for birth registration of children without birth certificates (1 <sup>st</sup> time)	PIC, mass organisations, legal officers, standing office of PC, local staff	CPFC office District 4
15/05	Discussion with children and staff on how to involve children in the process of applying the grassroots democracy decree	PIC, local staff, ward children's core groups	CPFC office District 4
17/05	Meeting to reinforce the activities of 6 counselling rooms	PIC, mass organisations, standing office of PC, local staff	CPFC office District 4
22/05	Organising a second training course on communication skills for core group children	PIC, district children's core group	CPFC office District 4
26-27/05	CRC training (1 <sup>st</sup> time)	Key staff of government and mass organisation of 15 wards	CPFC office District 4
29/05	Organising a third training course on communication skills for district children's core group	PIC, district children's core group	CPFC office District 4
03/06	Workshop on results of survey on CEDC	PIC, mass organisations, ward PCs, ward children's core groups	Political Training Centre District 4
7-8/06	CRC training (2 <sup>nd</sup> time)	Key staff of government and mass organisation of 15 wards	CPFC office District 4
13-17/06	Workshop on how to deal with school drop-outs and improve the quality of non-formal education	PIC, district education department, education council of 15 wards, principals of 21 schools and concerned teachers	Political Training Centre District 4
21/06	Meeting to discuss solutions for birth registration of children without birth certificates (2 <sup>nd</sup> time)	PIC, mass organisations, legal officers, standing office of PC, local staff	CPFC office District 4
24/06	Workshop on budget allocation for child welfare	PIC, people's council, district planning & financial department, mass organisations, ward PCs	CPFC office District 4
01/07	Meeting to discuss solutions for birth registration of children without birth certificates (3 <sup>rd</sup> time)	PIC, mass organisations, legal officers, standing office of PC, local staff	CPFC office District 4

Some mass organisations and government agencies succeeded in raising funds to implement a few activities that they had planned during or after the annual CRN workshop, but the problem still remained that these activities could not be officially integrated into the district's mainstream budget and programming.

Furthermore, the necessary monitoring of any such activities was not efficiently carried out by CPFC and/or the project, presumably due to a lack of time and human resources. The result was that the impact of the CFD could not be properly measured beyond the activities financed by SCS. Even these sometimes proved difficult to monitor effectively, especially when they were carried out both extensively and simultaneously. For example, project reports



failed to mention that a few of the 51 sub-wards had decided for one reason or another to drop out of the children's environment campaign.

It was very difficult, perhaps impossible, for an under-staffed office to be able to fulfil its mandate effectively, namely to visit all mainstream children's programmes and services in the district regularly in order to ensure that children's rights were being respected and that minimum standards of hygiene and care were being provided. The CFD was an additional responsibility, whose success demanded an immense investment of time. So CPFC had to rely very often on written reports for their information, without being able to verify the contents themselves.

Nonetheless it was another good year, and once again, despite the inevitable delays and constraints inherent in the local government structure, the project had become much better known at all levels in the community, and had demonstrated in a more effective way than before, that children, if given the opportunity, were a resource to the community rather than a burden.

Some government agencies and mass organisations could already see for themselves the benefit of consulting children before making decisions, instead of treating them as the passive beneficiaries of services designed solely by adults. The challenge now was to try and bring about a similar change of attitude within the children's families.

## **6. Plans for year four: 2005/6**

The project agreement in the current (4<sup>th</sup>) year runs from August 2005 to December 2006.

As a result of the findings of the CEDC survey and the project's continued difficulty in bringing CEDC into the ward and district core groups, it was decided that year 4 should focus primarily on the access of CEDC to mainstream services and on ensuring their inclusion in the project. The new Law on the Protection and Care of Children (2005) had a separate section on CEDC, who were divided into eight categories. It was clear that the Government wanted to do more for these children, and therefore this CFD objective was very opportune.

The other key objective of the year, which was also highlighted in the CEDC survey, was to conduct more awareness-raising work with families, so that they could provide better care and have a better understanding of their children.

The project had now learned that it was best to concentrate on a limited number of priority areas rather than attempt to cover a wide range of issues.

This is what was written by Mr. Nguyen of SCS to his manager in Hanoi in March 2005: "The CFD project cannot possibly do all that needs to be done to address all children's issues and should not even try. It should restrict itself to what it does well and what other organisations are unable/unwilling to do. Be ambitious with the quality not the quantity ... ." This was good advice, reflecting his thoughts after three years of experience with the project.

After discussion and agreement with SCS, the CRN, the district children's core group and local staff, the PIC drew up the CFD action plan to be financed by SCS in year 4, which was

incorporated into the agreement, as always. In addition to the regular meetings and activities carried out annually, here are the most important plans for the year:

- ❖ A CRN workshop and a series of meetings to plan activities for CEDC and ensure their access to basic services (already completed).
- ❖ A children's workshop focusing on CEDC and plans for next year (also completed).
- ❖ The composition of a detailed list of CEDC in each ward.
- ❖ An education forum between schools, children and parents.
- ❖ A forum for CEDC, who will present their concerns to district leaders.
- ❖ The production of a CFD handbook, that will list relevant policies and local services for children in District 4.
- ❖ An awareness-raising campaign in the community on children's rights and child-related laws and policies.
- ❖ Activities to help families take better care of their children.

The idea of holding a forum or dialogue at school level between school staff, children and parents (in accordance with the grassroots democracy decree) makes a lot of sense, provided that work is done with school principals and teachers so that they are able to see this process as a way of improving their service, rather than as an attack on themselves.

In reality, this kind of meeting is one of the key in-built mechanisms in many countries, enabling senior school staff to discuss the problems and issues raised by their stakeholders, as well as to offer services and activities that children and parents really want rather than those which the school or education authorities decide are best.

If, some time in the future, the project succeeds in instigating an annual forum of this kind in each primary and secondary school in the district, where children and parents can voice their concerns freely and which the school treats as part of their regular review process, it will have done a huge service to education in the district.

The plan to give CEDC an opportunity to discuss their concerns with district leaders is also very much part of the project's philosophy. It will be interesting to see whether these children can be helped to present their ideas coherently and with confidence, and whether the district leaders will have the opportunity and willingness to have a real discussion with them, rather than just respond by means of a series of speeches .

With regards to the strengthening of parenting skills in the community, the Open University has been approached by the project to provide ideas and support. Although the profession of social work is not part of the government's range of services in Vietnam, it is considered important by the project that local people can be trained to help parents or children in a crisis situation, so that the number of school drop-outs, abused children, juvenile delinquents, child drug addicts and children involved in prostitution can be reduced.

The CRN workshop early in the 4<sup>th</sup> year (11-14 October 2005) may prove to have been a breakthrough in the history of the CFD, although time will tell whether decisions made there will be transformed into reality.

Even though CRN annual workshops and quarterly meetings were usually quite well attended (with some notable absences), it was often the case that the concerned district leaders did not participate themselves, but sent more junior representatives in their place. Since these people

could not make any commitments on behalf of their agency, many proposals and plans were left pending or forgotten. The PC Vice-Chairman, Mr Dat, realised that this situation posed a problem for the CFD, and instructed CRN leaders that they must attend themselves in future, beginning with the 4-day workshop in October 2005.

Mr. Dat set the example himself by attending 2 days of the workshop, which was facilitated by Mr. Nguyen of SCS. Unfortunately the departments of education and health, as well as the district police and representatives of 5 wards, were not present; and so Mr. Dat made it clear that there would be a second meeting in District 4 three weeks later, to be attended by all 15 government and mass organisations in the CRN, including the key departments of education and health.

The agenda of the workshop was:

- ❖ To look at the CRC and the new Law on the Protection and Care of Children, with particular attention to the 8 categories of CEDC.
- ❖ To summarise and discuss the results of the CEDC survey.
- ❖ To identify the problems faced by CEDC in accessing basic services.
- ❖ To list existing services for CEDC and the gaps in those services, with each agency present formulating and presenting plans for activities that could fill the gaps.
- ❖ On the basis of these plans, to put together a joint action plan for implementation by the concerned agencies in the following year.

The PIC and SCS were determined that the plans made by the CRN agencies during this and future workshops should no longer continue to be a theoretical (even if useful) exercise which members could later ignore when drawing up their programmes. And this is where the breakthrough came, for Mr. Dat, who participated actively and in a very practical way during the first two days of the workshop, agreed that the plan of action produced by the CRN would be part of the district's official policy. This was also accepted by all the district leaders present.

If respected, this decision means that the project will have a vastly more significant place in the district than it has ever had before; indeed, the aim that the CFD will one day cease to be a project but be an inseparable part of the district's programming seems almost attainable.

By the end of the workshop several CRN members (including a few government departments, mass organisations and ward PCs) had each proposed activities that their agency could undertake to identify CEDC and help them to access basic services.



Mr Dat made it clear that the plans, when finalised, should be realistic, in line with government policy and specific.

During the second meeting three weeks later, when the heads of several social centres and institutions for children were also invited, further proposals were made by those agencies not present at the workshop.

Mr. Dat once again lent his support to the project by making it clear to all CRN agencies that he wanted the gaps in services which had been identified during the workshop to be filled, and that their action plans must be on his desk by 15 November.

The final plan of action for activities and services to be implemented at different levels within the district and by different agencies was extremely comprehensive. A few of the key plans (all relating to CEDC) are as follows:

- ❖ Conduct a campaign to encourage CEDC to go to school and to motivate their parents to send them.
- ❖ Open more special or non-formal classes.
- ❖ Encourage them to join children's ward core groups.
- ❖ Organise more out-of-school activities.
- ❖ Provide a regular free or heavily subsidised health check and free health insurance.
- ❖ Organise a campaign on disease prevention with the children's participation.
- ❖ Conduct a campaign for parents and care-givers on children's health and nutrition.
- ❖ Organise a free playground, as well as outdoor performances, films and excursions.
- ❖ Propagate the laws concerning child protection and relevant government policies amongst all CEDC and their families.
- ❖ Expedite the issue of birth certificates to all children without them.

These and many other activities listed in the action plan are now supposed to be part of the district's official programme, to be financed through the government budget or special fund-raising activities, but not by the project. If children can be involved in the planning and realisation of some of these activities, as has been the consistent message of the project from the beginning, then the district is well on the road to becoming a CFD.

The children's workshop in the 4<sup>th</sup> year was also very interesting. After the survey on CEDC was completed, a number of children who had been identified during the research were brought into the core group, mostly school drop-outs, working children, disabled children and sexually abused girls. One or two were HIV positive or had parents with HIV/AIDS. Most of these new children (20 in all) participated in the 3-day workshop in Dalat, representing 70% of those present. Only two or three of them were unable to handle the rather demanding rhythm of work, dropping out of some of the group work.

The agenda, as usual, was to present the approved plans for the year and to ask the children to work together in groups in order to decide what should be their active contribution towards the realisation of those plans.

The workshop was facilitated by a youngster, called Truong, who was given employment in the project after he had become too old to continue in the core group. He had first-hand knowledge of how these workshops were run, and had learned many facilitation skills during his involvement in the project. He was helped by another ex-core group member; and eight longer-serving members of the district core group also acted as facilitators, having been asked to encourage and support the new members (CEDC), for whom the workshop was a very new experience.

The children were divided into six mixed groups, the rules being that there must be no discrimination between the old members and the new (CEDC), that each member of each group must participate and that nobody could make more than one presentation to the full assembly.

*One new boy, a school drop-out and working child who helped his family in their small home-based shoe-making business, was voted by his group to make a presentation on their behalf. However, he refused, saying that he felt nervous about appearing in front of everybody, especially because he had a poor level of education and had difficulty in reading and writing.*

*The other children went to Mr. Chau to ask what they should do. He told them that it was up to them to find a good solution. So they told the boy that they would all be there to support him. If ever he became stuck, all he had to do was to look them in the eyes, and they would help him by adding anything that he had missed or forgotten. This was enough to persuade him, and when he gave his presentation, he was assured, articulate and needed no help at all.*

The children made the following plans during the course of the workshop:

- ❖ The 20 new members of the core group (CEDC) need training on child rights, life skills and communication skills.
- ❖ CPFC should work with these children's families in order to demonstrate the benefits to the children of participating in core group activities.
- ❖ Some compensation should be paid to working children, so that they can participate without losing money in the process.
- ❖ The forum for CEDC and district leaders should be very well prepared. 20 children should be chosen from each ward to discuss and decide on the issues to be presented. The local staff should receive training in facilitation skills in order to ensure that this process achieves the desired results. Five children will be elected from each ward to participate in the forum, which will last for 1½ days (in March 2006).
- ❖ Regarding the CFD Handbook, children will comment on the draft and suggest any changes. The handbook should be distributed to local people during their sub-ward meetings, as well as through the school network. CEDC can present it to their own parents.
- ❖ The children will participate in the HIV/AIDS campaign in a similar way as they did in the environment campaign in the previous year.

The fourth year would appear to be off to a good start, and the project's concentration on CEDC and the family could prove to be the right decision, if all the activities of the project and of the CRN agencies are implemented as planned.

### CHILD PARTICIPATION IN ACTION 2003 -2005



## 6. Strengths, weaknesses and challenges

SCS first talked seriously about a Child Friendly District way back in 1998. It is interesting to note that the goals which emerged from those internal discussions, described at the beginning of the first chapter, have hardly changed at all. Whilst many new ideas and activities have been tested since the opening of the project in 2002, the fundamental aims and approach of the CFD have been exceptionally consistent throughout this period.

The project has a number of key strengths in concept, composition and methodology that enabled it to be accepted by the district authorities in the first place and that account for its growing success today:

- ❖ It mostly supports and strengthens existing services instead of doing its own thing.
- ❖ The implementing agency - CPFC - has a mandate which is fully compatible with the objectives and principles of the CFD.
- ❖ The title holder is the PC, thus putting the project at the heart of the district and giving it the support it needs.
- ❖ Its growing focus on CEDC corresponds with the government's own stated priorities.
- ❖ It has introduced a breath of fresh air with the development of a strong children's core group in the district and their exuberant activities.
- ❖ It has taken the government's own grassroots democracy decree and used it to open people's eyes in a very practical way to the fact that children, as well as adults, have a voice and a useful role to play in issues and services that affect them.
- ❖ The main players - the PIC, PC vice-chairman and SCS project officer - are actively committed to the project, each person making a vital contribution to its development.
- ❖ The creation of the CRN has demonstrated to most of its members the benefits of co-ordinated planning.

A number of mistakes, however, were made along the way, but even those mistakes were perhaps a necessary learning process in order to steer the project in the right direction. There is still some way to go and some hurdles to get over before the CFD can be considered as a valid model for other districts and potential funding partners to follow. Nonetheless there is also much to learn not only from the way that the project has managed to integrate itself into the network of services in District 4, but also from some of the obstacles encountered over time.

When SCS first talked to CPFC and the PC of District 4 about the project, the approach was too academic and too absolute to be effective. The principles of child participation, rights-based work with children, non-discrimination, inclusion in education, etc., etc., which were constantly repeated themes in meetings and documents, were perceived to be too doctrinaire, theoretical and idealistic by a district that was struggling with very real problems of its own. It all sounded too good to be true, and put many people off instead of turning them on. As a result, a lot of time was wasted and some key people lost interest during the fruitless process of trying to transform those rigid principles into a project. It was only when a very practical and common-sense solution was proposed that the process became unstuck.

As mentioned earlier, the project tried to do too much at the beginning by addressing all six of the children's voiced concerns simultaneously, instead of concentrating on the most important issues and doing them full justice. More is less; less is more.

Education is obviously at the top of the list of important issues, because the vast majority of children spend several hours, five or six days a week for eight or nine months a year, in school. If, in accordance with the grassroots democracy decree and common sense, the users of a particular service should be consulted during the planning of that service, then it follows that since children are the only service users of primary and secondary schools, they should have an important input into education planning.

So it is clear that education must be one of the project's main concerns. Unfortunately it also presents one of its main obstacles. The notion that children should be allowed (even less have a right) to discuss problems and propose improvements in their schools in a structured way has not yet been accepted by most principals and teachers. Such a form of child participation is still mostly considered by them as an affront to their status rather than as a way of helping them to provide a better service. Some children who did speak out strongly during the education forum of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year were reprimanded afterwards.

As Mr. Dat, the PC vice-chairman, pointed out, it will take time for these traditional beliefs to disappear. The fact that the education department, along with the department of health, does not participate very often in CRN workshops and meetings, suggests that it is not yet ready to embrace the principles of child participation that are at the heart of the CFD. Or perhaps people simply do not have the time. Either way, this is an obstacle that the project must find a way to overcome.

This relative lack of progress in the education sector brings home the reality that the project is not the first priority of the district or of CPFC, whose mainstream programmes are their chief preoccupation. On the other hand, the principles and objectives of the CFD, if they are to be realised effectively, require a huge investment of time and effort. That is the dilemma.

To compound the problem, the district's administration and network of services, especially CPFC, are considerably understaffed. This means that the long and careful work done in preparation for all the major CFD events in which children have participated (such as the environment campaign, the education forum, etc.) cannot easily be replicated in another district without additional human resources. On top of that is the problem faced by all districts in the city, namely the constant changes of staff. No sooner has a person been given some form of professional training and has started to work effectively, than s/he leaves, and the whole process has to start over again. This is a huge problem especially with regard to jobs where success is based on human relationships, such as the work done by the ward CPFC staff. The frequent transfer of district leaders can also be an obstacle to good management.

This shortage of human resources and time has also meant that the monitoring and follow-up of activities promoted or even carried out by the project has not been very systematic or meticulous. CPFC, in line with other government agencies, relies mostly on written reports for monitoring purposes. Most government quarterly reports are very general and tend to say that all is well, even if this is not necessarily the case. Perhaps it might help if each annual CRN workshop started with a reminder of the plans made during the previous workshop and a presentation from each agency of the activities that they had actually implemented during the previous 12 months.

With one or two possible exceptions, the project has made an impact on the leaders of district agencies and many of their senior staff, who have seen what children are capable of doing and whose attitudes have perhaps changed somewhat in the process. The children in the core

group say the same thing, namely that they are given more respect than before by such people. However, the same children say that little has changed at school or at home. The issue of education has already been discussed. With regards to the family, the children have many complaints, the chief ones being that their parents never listen to them and that beatings are common practice. So although many parents and other members of the community were impressed by the children's performances in the 2001 dialogue and especially in the 2004/5 environment campaign, their traditional attitudes and behaviour towards their own children have apparently not changed. Again, this is a challenge for the project in its remaining years, and one which it is addressing in its plans for 2006.

Coming to the project itself, in spite of the decision to invite a large number of CEDC to the annual workshop in Dalat, the PIC still finds it hard to retain their interest and participation in the project.

It has therefore recently been decided that 50% of the district core group will in future be CEDC. This is easy to say and less easy to do in a way that is fair and avoids conflict. Up until now, children have been elected from the wards on a democratic basis to participate in the district core group, and from there to the special events such as the very popular 3-day workshop in Dalat. The children were chosen because they had the time, interest and ability to make a useful contribution. Now, with the 50% CEDC rule, the fairness of the democratic process is compromised. Whenever "positive discrimination" in favour of one group or another is imposed, there are always people who rightly feel a sense of injustice.

It is likely that many CEDC will not be able to attend meetings and events as regularly as children from better off or more stable backgrounds, even if given incentives to do so. If they are therefore asked to leave the core group for that reason, they may possibly never participate in the CFD again. If they are allowed to participate irregularly, the effectiveness and dynamism of the core group may be affected.

It is important to provide whatever encouragement, training and support can be given to CEDC so that they can feel welcome and valued in the ward core groups. If they are elected on merit to join the district core group and then perhaps to the workshop in Dalat or other events, they will feel much more motivated than if they are just part of a charitable quota bearing a CEDC label. An additional benefit will be that the other children will not feel any resentment.

Another problem is the definition of CEDC. In order to respect the privacy of children who are drug-takers or HIV positive or abused sexually or physically, they cannot be identified openly as such. So if they are included in the 50%, other children may want to know the reason why they are considered as CEDC. It is a difficult issue, particularly as there is often a very thin or blurred dividing line in reality between CEDC and other children.

It is also possible that the project, by focusing so much on the district children's core group, has not done enough to strengthen the local CPFC staff's work with the children's core groups in the wards and with families in the local community. From the very beginning, there have been big differences between wards with regards to their level of interest and participation in the project. This may be due to the frequent changes of local staff, as mentioned earlier, or it may be due to insufficient training and support. In either case, there may be ways of addressing the problem, which the project can help to identify and support.



Without much doubt the biggest challenge that lies ahead is how to make the CFD into a sustainable model that can be adopted by other districts. As the project stands at present, some aspects would be difficult to replicate without an injection of extra resources, both human and financial. These need to be examined by the project in turn.

Firstly, the annual 3 or 4 day workshops in Dalat for the CRN and children consume a significant part of the budget. They would appear to be a very important part of the project's awareness-raising, capacity-building and planning process. Can anything be done to reduce the costs, without any qualitative loss? Or can such workshops perhaps become progressively shorter over time?

With regards to human resources, the PIC consists of the project coordinator, who is basically responsible for implementation on behalf of CPFC, a full-time trainer/advisor, who also does a lot of administrative and writing work for the project, and more recently an ex-core group member who acts as a full-time assistant, facilitator and liaison with the children. The project coordinator, Mr. Chau, admits that he spends around 50% of his time on the CFD, for which he has been blamed by higher authorities. He also works most Sundays, which is the only time during the school term when the children's core group is available to meet and conduct activities. As mentioned earlier, if the CFD is to be replicated elsewhere, it will certainly fail if it is managed by a person with a bureaucratic mentality who is unwilling to work during weekends and evenings. This applies also to any other staff involved in the project.

The other two members of the PIC are paid out of the budget provided by SCS, i.e. they are not part of the district's workforce. It is probable that both these posts are essential. If so, any replica of the CFD will have to find the people and the salaries from somewhere. If CPFC remains as understaffed as it is at present, it would be hard, perhaps impossible, for it to manage the project effectively using its own human resources.

Another major challenge faced by the project has been its powerlessness to ensure that the plans made by CRN agencies during the CRN workshops and quarterly meetings are in fact implemented. If funds are provided to carry out the child-focused activities that emerge from these discussions and planning sessions, then these activities will be dependent on SCS and therefore unlikely to be sustainable. If no funds are provided, however, then there is a risk that nothing much will be done. That has been a dilemma for the project since the beginning. However, if it is true, as reported, that the plans made during and after the CRN workshop in November 2005 will be officially integrated into District 4's mainstream programmes in 2006, and the same policy is maintained in the future, then a large part of that challenge will have been met.

To conclude, the CFD is a dynamic project that is still in the process of experimentation. It is not easy, anywhere in the world, to introduce radical innovations into a government bureaucracy. The project is attempting to do so in a way that is practical, prudent and appealing. After a shaky start it has gained significant momentum and credibility within the district to the extent that its principles are being applied more and more in mainstream activities. And that was what it originally set out to do.