

Reconceptualisation and Transnational Translation in Latin American Social Work: Working Children's Movements and Community-Based Drug Responses

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Abstract & Keywords: International social work values both participation and contextual adaptation, yet neither principle explains who can change the norms and organisational conditions governing an intervention. This article develops a conceptual comparison of working children's movements and community-based drug responses in Latin America. A selective synthesis uses the contested legacy of reconceptualisation as an analytical resource, without assuming direct historical descent. Four dimensions organise the comparison: structural interpretation, participation and collective agency, critical translation, and power-sensitive transnationalism. Working children's movements contest how protection and participation are interpreted and who may represent children's interests. Harm-reduction and ECO2-informed initiatives negotiate access to care and the organisational legitimacy of practices within legal, professional and funding constraints. The comparison distinguishes influence over problem definition from influence over the conditions under which support is delivered. It also shows why neither movement representation nor peer involvement can stand alone as evidence of shared decision-making. Five orienting principles connect contextual understanding and social rights with attention to professional mediation, accountability and unequal resources. The contribution is a comparative account of where participatory authority is exercised and constrained, rather than a general model of Latin American social work.

Keywords: social work; Latin America; reconceptualisation; transnational translation; working children; harm reduction

1 Introduction

International social work frequently combines commitments to participation, social rights and context-sensitive practice. These commitments leave an important practical question unresolved: who can alter the definitions, priorities and conditions through which an intervention operates? Participation may influence a movement's public demands, a service's delivery arrangements or a funder's assessment criteria, but these are different forms of authority. Treating them as interchangeable can obscure the institutional limits of ostensibly participatory practice. Working children's movements and community-based responses to drugs offer contrasting settings in which to examine this problem (Taft, 2019; Machín, 2010; Machín Ramírez, 2016).

The comparison focuses on selected Latin American contexts, primarily Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking settings. National histories, professional traditions and welfare arrangements differ substantially across the region (Reyes-Quilodrán & Baikady, 2023; Sátyro et al., 2021). The analysis gives particular attention to historical debates in the Southern Cone, working children's organisations in Peru, harm reduction in Brazil and ECO2-related networks originating in Mexico. The term 'transnational dynamics' refers here to the cross-border

circulation of professional concepts, organisations, resources and political ideas and their interpretation within specific institutional settings.

The article centres on the reconceptualisation movement, *reconceptualización* in Spanish and *reconceitualização* in Portuguese, which emerged in the mid-1960s. Reconceptualisation was neither a single doctrine nor a linear, region-wide replacement of an older professional model. It developed through contested debates in interconnected institutional sites and brought modernising, technocratic, conservative, Marxist, dependency-theoretical and liberation-oriented currents into conflict (Servio, 2014). Its more radical currents questioned imported methods, professional neutrality and interpretations of poverty as individual deficit and can be read as a historically situated praxis for liberation (Ferguson et al., 2018).

Indigenisation is used here not as rejection of external knowledge or the creation of a culturally pure Latin American model, but as critical appropriation, translation and transformation in relation to local knowledge and conditions. Such processes remain embedded in unequal relations of funding, authority and recognition. Third Space perspectives sharpen this point by showing that organisations may generate context-specific practices while also reproducing donor priorities or professional hierarchies (van der Hoek, 2026b).

The article asks how a comparative reading informed by reconceptualisation can distinguish the forms and limits of participation when international norms enter local practice. Its argument concerns the location of authority: influence over the interpretation of rights does not necessarily confer control over service provision, while involvement in delivering a service does not necessarily confer authority to change its rules. The two fields bring these differences into view. The aim is to specify questions for professional judgement and organisational accountability, rather than to infer a uniform regional trajectory.

An earlier regional synthesis already connected the history of reconceptualisation with working children's movements and community-based drug responses (van der Hoek, 2026a). Those historical themes and illustrative fields are shared with the present article. The contribution developed here is narrower: a structured comparison of the decisions over which participants and professionals exercise authority. It distinguishes the interpretation of rights and legitimate needs from the organisational conditions of access to support, while examining the connections between them. This extension is conceptual and does not introduce a new empirical dataset.

1.1 Analytical Approach

The article uses a selective critical synthesis of published scholarship and public policy documents. Its source base brings Spanish- and Portuguese-language contributions into dialogue with English- and German-language work. Sources are included for their relevance to the historical argument, the interpretation of participation and rights, or the description of the two selected fields. This is a purposive conceptual comparison, not an exhaustive literature search or a systematic review.

The materials serve different evidentiary purposes. Historical and professional analyses inform the account of reconceptualisation and its limits; studies of working children's movements inform the discussion of collective representation; accounts of harm reduction, ECO2 and RAISSS inform the discussion of intervention and networking. International conventions and policy documents establish the normative frameworks with which these practices engage. These sources cannot be treated interchangeably: a normative commitment does not demonstrate implementation, and an organisational description does not establish effectiveness.

The comparison asks four common questions: how a problem is structurally interpreted; which actors influence decisions; what is changed when norms or methods enter a setting; and how cross-border relationships distribute authority and resources. The dimensions are defined before the two fields are examined and then used to identify differences as well as similarities. Statements about particular settings are attributed to the relevant sources; the comparative implications are the article's analytical interpretation. The selection permits examination of contrasting forms of participation, but not generalisation to all Latin American social work.

2 Historical Background

2.1 Early Professionalisation

Social work education did not emerge from a single regional blueprint. The first school commonly identified as a social work training institution in Latin America was founded in Chile in 1925 under the initiative of the physician Alejandro del Río, followed by another Chilean school in 1929. Training institutions were subsequently established under different political and institutional conditions elsewhere in the region (Reyes-Quilodrán & Baikady, 2023). Chile nevertheless occupied a prominent position in early professionalisation and curricular circulation.

European concepts entered emerging institutions through translated literature, visiting professionals, curriculum advice and training abroad. Paraíso (1966) identifies influences from France, Germany, Belgium and Spain, while Wendt (2017) discusses the role of European-trained practitioners in Chilean curriculum development. These connections involved professional borrowing and curricular interpretation within existing welfare institutions; they did not entail the transfer of an intact model.

Early institutions combined medical, Catholic, philanthropic, and public-welfare traditions in different ways. In Chile and some other Spanish-speaking contexts, *visitadoras sociales* worked alongside physicians and other professionals, monitored living and health conditions and mediated access to assistance. Such activities contributed to a distinct occupational field but could retain hierarchical relationships with recipients. In this article, *asistencialismo* refers not to material assistance as such, but to paternalistic provision that administers need while recipients remain objects of intervention. It is distinguished from *asistencia*, understood as material and social support provided as a right (Alayón, 1980, 2008).

2.2 Developmentalism and Transfer

The Second World War and post-war geopolitical order altered these connections. Opportunities for training in Europe diminished, while scholarships, technical assistance and development programmes connected some Latin American institutions more closely with the United States. Curricula incorporated North American casework, group work and community organisation alongside older welfare traditions. The result was an uneven reconfiguration of professional education, rather than a simultaneous regional transition from religious charity to secular professionalism (Paraíso, 1966; Servio, 2014).

The expanding North American influence was embedded in developmentalism. During the 1950s and 1960s, international organisations and United States-led programmes promoted modernisation, state planning and technically managed interventions against poverty. The Alliance for Progress, launched in 1961, linked development finance to institutional reform and strategies of social integration (Dunne, 2013; Servio, 2014). Community development became a major component of this agenda. Social workers were increasingly expected to act as 'agents

of change' who mobilised local populations and connected them with governmental programmes. Yet participation could remain instrumental when communities were invited into programmes whose goals were largely defined by governments and international experts (Servio, 2014).

Argentina illustrates both transfer and resistance. In the 1950s, the government requested United Nations technical assistance for social work education. The Chilean social worker Valentina Maidagán de Ugarte reviewed approximately 15 institutes and recommended stronger technical training, field placements, and community development. Her recommendations informed the Social Service Institute of Buenos Aires, founded in 1959, but existing schools did not uniformly accept the proposed reforms (Servio, 2014). The episode therefore exemplifies situated professional transfer rather than a regional template.

2.3 Contested Reconceptualisation

The contradictions of developmentalist social work became increasingly visible during the 1960s. In Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, field experience brought students and practitioners into direct contact with inequality, political mobilisation and community organisations. Some concluded that methods developed under different social conditions did not adequately address local realities and that claims of professional neutrality concealed assumptions about adaptation and social order (Servio, 2014).

These debates intersected with the Cuban Revolution, anti-colonial movements, student mobilisation, dependency theory, Marxist currents and changes within Catholicism following the Second Vatican Council. Rather than replacing one paradigm uniformly with another, these influences widened the range of positions competing within social work and strengthened demands for historically and structurally grounded interpretations of inequality.

Servio (2014) treats 1965 as a conventional point of departure and identifies three interconnected nodes: the first Latin American Social Service Seminar in Porto Alegre, curriculum reform at the Universidad de la República in Uruguay, and the first issue of the Argentine journal *Hoy en el Servicio Social*, followed by Editorial ECRO as a publishing network. Reconceptualisation developed through particular institutions, especially in the Southern Cone, before its debates extended more widely.

The movement remained internally contradictory. Editorial ECRO's early publications still engaged with developmentalist professionalisation, while later contributors increasingly adopted positions oriented towards structural change and liberation. Conservative, developmentalist, technocratic, Marxist, dependency-theoretical and liberation-oriented positions therefore coexisted and competed (Servio, 2014). Radical currents criticised casework, group work and community organisation when applied as context-free techniques aimed at adaptation, and challenged the supposed neutrality of social workers. This did not produce a uniform abandonment of conventional methods or state practice.

The more emancipatory strand located individual and collective difficulties within relations of inequality, domination and dependency and aligned social work more closely with the *sectores populares* or *setores populares*. Affected populations were increasingly approached not only as recipients but as participants in collective interpretation, organisation and transformation. In this limited sense, reconceptualisation can be understood as a praxis for liberation (Ferguson et al., 2018).

The transnational character of reconceptualisation was also different from the earlier circulation of professional models. Whereas much pre-1960s transfer was organised through European or North American training, technical assistance and translated literature, the new movement increasingly generated South-South circulation through seminars, journals, professional associations and publishing networks. Editorial ECRO was particularly significant because it connected debates that were locally rooted but regionally legible. This does not mean that national differences disappeared; rather, the shared vocabulary of dependency, liberation, structural inequality and professional commitment provided a basis for argument across borders (Servio, 2014).

3 Analytical Framework

Four dimensions organise the comparison. Structural interpretation and participation draw on critical debates associated with reconceptualisation. Critical translation and power-sensitive transnationalism connect those concerns to the contemporary question of how knowledge and authority move across institutions. The resulting framework is an interpretive construction: it does not imply that reconceptualisation caused the emergence of the two fields or that practitioners necessarily identify with that movement.

First, structural interpretation locates social problems within historically produced inequalities, institutions and political-economic conditions rather than primarily in individual dysfunction. Immediate needs remain important, but they are interpreted in relation to labour markets, welfare systems, legal frameworks and unequal distributions of power (Netto, 2003; Molina & Ruiz, 2005; Alayón & Molina, 2007).

Second, participation and collective agency concern affected people's capacity to interpret conditions, articulate interests, and shape responses. Meaningful participation entails influence over problem definition, priorities, decisions, implementation or evaluation; influence in one of these areas does not establish influence in the others. Professional responsibility remains, but its exercise should permit experiential and local knowledge to affect decisions rather than merely supplying information to professionals (Aquín, 2003; Pereira, 2003; van der Hoek, 2026b).

Third, critical translation describes how internationally circulating norms and methods are interpreted and transformed in specific settings rather than simply copied or rejected. The Third Space serves here only as a supplementary lens: third-sector organisations can mediate between global standards and locally embedded knowledge, but such negotiation remains shaped by unequal authority and resources (van der Hoek, 2026b).

Fourth, power-sensitive transnationalism treats cross-border exchange as both enabling and unequal. Networks can circulate knowledge, resources and advocacy, yet their organisational arrangements condition whose claims gain recognition. Funding, professional credentials and access to decision-makers can shape that recognition. The analytical question is therefore how cooperation distributes the capacity to set priorities, rather than whether cross-border contact exists (Machín Ramírez, 2016; van der Hoek, 2026b).

The units of comparison are fields of organised claims and intervention, rather than matched countries or programmes. Working children's movements make collective representation central to disputes about protection and participation. Community-based drug responses make access to support and the organisation of care central to disputes about public health and control.

Both involve translation across institutional boundaries, but the actors and decisions at stake differ.

The four dimensions are analytically connected but should not be collapsed into a single normative standard. Structural interpretation without participation can reproduce expert authority; participation without structural analysis can individualise responsibility for problems rooted in institutions; translation without attention to power can become superficial cultural adaptation; and transnational networking without meaningful participation can reproduce the very hierarchies it claims to overcome. The purpose of the framework is therefore diagnostic: it identifies tensions that should be examined in practice rather than prescribing a uniform intervention model.

4 Working Children's Movements

4.1 Protection and Participation

International children's rights instruments require both protection and participation. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises children's right to express their views in matters affecting them and requires those views to be given due weight according to age and maturity. Article 32 addresses economic exploitation and work that is hazardous, interferes with education or harms development. ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182 establish minimum-age standards and obligations concerning the worst forms of child labour. The tension examined here concerns how these obligations are interpreted and implemented, rather than an inherent incompatibility between the rights themselves (International Labour Organization, 1973, 1999; United Nations, 1989).

In Peru, organised working children have argued that abolition-oriented policies can collapse very different forms and conditions of work into a single category. Their criticism is not directed against protection from exploitation, coercion or danger. It concerns interventions that prohibit work without considering why children work, under what conditions, or what happens when income-generating activities are removed without viable social alternatives. In this view, prohibition can increase stigma or policing while leaving poverty and insufficient social protection intact (Taft, 2019).

The movements therefore distinguish work from exploitation rather than endorsing unrestricted child labour. Some activities may be discussed in relation to survival, learning, dignity or belonging, while forced, hazardous and exploitative labour is rejected. Context sensitivity must not become cultural relativism: age, hours, risk, remuneration, freedom to refuse, effects on education and access to social protection remain essential criteria. Economic necessity can constrain what appears to be individual choice.

It is also misleading to oppose Latin American realities to a single 'Western' childhood. The more precise tension concerns policy models that privilege a school-centred, economically dependent and strongly protected childhood. Taft (2019) documents varied forms of work among movement participants in Peru, from family agriculture and market activity to street vending, domestic work and small informal enterprises. These activities differ substantially in risk and meaning. The movements' argument is not that poverty or child work should be normalised, but that protection must respond to actual living conditions.

Education illustrates the practical stakes. Working children's organisations have called for non-discriminatory schooling and arrangements responsive to children whose work and family

responsibilities affect attendance. The Kundapur Declaration also included demands for education appropriate to working children's circumstances (International Labour Organization, 2006; Miljeteig, 2000). Such demands raise questions about the accessibility and quality of schooling alongside the regulation of work; they should not be read as evidence that separate educational tracks are necessarily desirable or effective.

This tension also complicates the language of choice. Children may describe work positively because it provides income, competence or recognition, while the same activity may occur under conditions of severe economic constraint. Treating such accounts as either false consciousness or unrestricted free choice would miss the relational character of agency. A context-sensitive rights perspective therefore takes children's interpretations seriously while examining the material and institutional conditions under which those interpretations are formed. Protection and participation become mutually corrective rather than mutually exclusive principles.

The distinction matters for social policy. A prohibition may remove a child from a dangerous workplace yet fail if it is not accompanied by income support, accessible schooling, or family welfare. Conversely, a policy that values children's agency but tolerates hazardous labour would abandon the protective dimension of children's rights. The movements are analytically important because they force these dimensions to be considered together rather than allowing either protection or participation to become an absolute principle.

4.2 Protagonismo and Professional Roles

The Peruvian movement expresses participation through protagonismo: the collective capacity of children to organise, decide, represent themselves and intervene in public life. Taft (2019) traces changing meanings of the concept, from class organisation and liberation-oriented politics, through children's rights frameworks, to an emphasis on interdependence and relationality. This historical variation matters to the comparison: participation is itself interpreted and contested within movements, rather than being a stable principle that professionals can simply apply.

Peru provides a nationally situated example. The Movimiento Nacional de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores Organizados del Perú (MNNATSOP) connects local organisations, while the Movimiento Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Trabajadores (MOLACNATS) provides a regional setting for exchange. These organisations represent organised participants, not all children who work; their claims must therefore be read with attention to the boundaries of representation (Taft, 2019).

Adult collaborators can sustain meetings, provide education, facilitate access to institutions and help secure resources, yet their expertise can also acquire disproportionate authority (Liebel & Meade, 2023). Professional social workers should therefore not be presented as the principal agents of these movements. Where they participate, they may support access to services, rights claims, organisational capacity and safeguarding. Their role becomes inconsistent with protagonismo when professional interpretations substitute for children's own analysis. Respect for agency, however, does not remove professional responsibilities of protection.

The organisational form of protagonismo also matters. It does not imply that every decision is made without adults or that children's organisations operate outside institutional relationships. Rather, it shifts the question from whether adults are present to how authority is distributed. Adult support can expand access to information, legal expertise and political arenas, but it can

also shape agendas or filter children's claims into forms more acceptable to institutions. This ambivalence makes the role of social workers especially relevant: facilitation can widen children's room for action, whereas representation on their behalf can unintentionally narrow it.

4.3 Transnational Networks

Working children's movements developed through local and national organisation before entering regional and transnational networks. Such networks enabled exchange, coordinated statements and participation in international debate, but did not make organised movements representative of all working children.

A significant moment was the first International Meeting of Working Children in Kundapur, India, in 1996. The ILO reports participation from 32 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America. The ten-point declaration called for recognition of children's organisations, respect and safety at work, appropriate education, healthcare and consultation in decisions affecting them while opposing exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2006; Miljeteig, 2000). Kundapur was therefore important as a forum of self-representation, not as proof of an international consensus on child labour.

Transnational networking created visibility and opportunities for collective learning but also depended on funding, travel, translation, adult support and organisational infrastructure. These conditions shaped who could participate and represent broader movements, making the network itself a site of unequal power.

5 Community-Based Drug Responses

5.1 Punitive Drug Control

Drugs and addiction form a transnational field in which international control regimes, illicit markets and national systems of policing, health and welfare intersect. Drug use does not necessarily amount to dependence; dependence is not equivalent to trafficking, and violence associated with illicit markets is shaped not only by substances but also by prohibition, competition, corruption, militarised enforcement and social conditions (Bergman, 2018; Csete et al., 2016).

International drug policy has also evolved. The UN General Assembly's 1998 Political Declaration set a ten-year horizon for significant and measurable reductions in illicit drug supply and demand, while the 2016 Special Session gave greater prominence to public health, treatment, human rights and social dimensions within the existing control framework (United Nations General Assembly, 1998, 2016). These shifts did not produce a uniform national transition. Health-oriented initiatives continue to coexist with policing, incarceration and, in some settings, militarised enforcement (Csete et al., 2016).

The World Drug Report 2026 estimates that 331 million people aged 15–64 used drugs in 2024, 34 per cent more people than in 2014. This is an increase in the estimated number of people, not a 34-per-cent increase in population prevalence, and it does not identify the causal effects of particular enforcement policies (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2026). The case for examining health and welfare responses also rests on research documenting incarceration, stigma, violence and barriers to care under enforcement-heavy policies (Csete et al., 2016).

Harm reduction seeks to reduce adverse health and social consequences without making abstinence an immediate precondition for support. It can prioritise safer behaviour, healthcare access, infectious-disease prevention and psychosocial support while leaving abstinence available as an individual goal (Logan & Marlatt, 2010). Machado and Boarini's (2013) historical account of Brazil describes an early initiative in Santos in 1989, its response to HIV transmission among people who inject drugs, the political and legal resistance it encountered, and subsequent incorporation of harm reduction into public-health and mental-health policy. This account illustrates contested institutional change; it does not establish a uniform or irreversible national transition.

For social work, the central issue is not whether criminal law has any role in drug policy, but what happens when punishment becomes the dominant lens through which people who use drugs are encountered. Criminalisation can restrict access to services, intensify stigma and make relationships of trust more difficult, particularly where people already experience insecure housing, poverty or exclusion from formal institutions. Harm reduction therefore shifts the professional question from moral evaluation of drug use to the reduction of concrete harms and the creation of conditions in which support can be accessed without prior compliance with abstinence.

5.2 ECO2 and Networks

One approach developed within this field is ECO2, often written ECO², combining Epistemología de la Complejidad and Ética Comunitaria. Developed through action research by Mexican civil-society organisations during the 1990s and later used in other countries, ECO2 is more accurately a meta-model than a standardised programme. It provides principles for context-specific intervention rather than an identical service package (Machín, 2010).

ECO2 addresses situations of social suffering, including but not limited to problematic drug use. It links individual experiences to personal and family networks, institutions, poverty, violence, stigma and access to services without reducing all drug problems to socioeconomic deprivation. Social networks serve both diagnostic and practical functions: interventions map relationships and resources and seek to construct operational networks among individuals, peers, families, organisations, professionals and public institutions (Machín, 2010).

Concrete activities may include outreach, low-threshold education and health information, HIV and hepatitis prevention, counselling, referral, listening or drop-in services, immediate material assistance, youth work, peer involvement and cooperation among residents and institutions. These activities vary by setting and should not be treated as a universal ECO2 package (Machín, 2010; Machín et al., 2010; Machado & Boarini, 2013). Nor is ECO2 exclusively a social-work model: its civil-society and interdisciplinary origins involve experiential knowledge, grassroots organisations, educators, health professionals, social workers and other actors.

Transnational circulation is illustrated by the Red Americana de Intervención en Situaciones de Sufrimiento Social (RAISSS). Machín Ramírez (2016) describes a network connecting civil-society networks in 15 Latin American countries that used ECO2 in work on social inclusion and public-policy advocacy. This describes the network at the time of that study, rather than its current membership, and establishes circulation of organisational knowledge rather than uniform implementation or comparative effectiveness.

The network perspective distinguishes ECO2 from interventions that locate change primarily within an individual client. A person's capacity to reduce harm may depend on whether

supportive relationships exist, whether services communicate with one another and whether local institutions are accessible without stigma or punishment. Network work can therefore involve strengthening existing relationships, creating connections between otherwise fragmented services and identifying actors who influence inclusion or exclusion. Its contextual character also means that the same organisational form cannot simply be reproduced across neighbourhoods or countries.

RAISSS adds a regional level to the network logic of local intervention. Machín Ramírez (2016) describes collective training and advocacy across civil-society organisations. For the present comparison, this raises a question about the relationship between organisational representation and participation by people using services. A network may widen the influence of member organisations without establishing how those organisations share decisions with service users. The two levels of participation therefore need separate examination.

5.3 Participation and Welfare

Community is used here analytically, not as a synonym for cohesion. It denotes a locally situated and internally differentiated field of relationships, institutions, resources and conflicts. Communities can sustain mutual aid and practical knowledge, but they can also reproduce stigma, exclusion and unequal authority. Community-based practice must therefore ask who participates, whose relationships are strengthened and who is authorised to speak for others.

Meaningful participation is more than consultation, attendance or the use of residents to deliver externally designed activities. People who use drugs, peer workers and other residents should be able to influence problem definitions, priorities, programme design, implementation and criteria of success. Machado and Boarini (2013) likewise stress that harm-reduction strategies must be developed in dialogue with the population concerned. Community involvement should complement, not replace, adequately funded public responsibility.

NGOs, community organisations and transnational networks often operate as hybrid welfare organisations that combine service provision, advocacy, professional and experiential knowledge, public or international funding and multiple accountability requirements. The Third Space perspective helps explain how global standards and local knowledge are negotiated rather than simply transferred. Yet hybridity is not inherently emancipatory: donor priorities, regulation, professional credentials and unequal access to policymaking shape which practices are legitimate and sustainable (van der Hoek, 2026b).

Social workers share this ambivalence. As counsellors, advocates, facilitators or network coordinators, they may connect people with services and support peer initiatives; as representatives of institutions or professional knowledge, they may also define eligibility and legitimate outcomes. Research and evaluation can support learning and accountability, but should not be treated as the sole sources of legitimacy. Participatory evaluation requires affected people to help determine what counts as a problem, a desirable outcome and credible evidence.

Hybrid welfare practice brings community trust into contact with formal accountability requirements. Low-threshold support can require flexible relationships with people who avoid public institutions, while funding arrangements can favour standardised documentation and bounded target groups. The Third Space perspective directs attention to the negotiation of these potentially competing expectations (van der Hoek, 2026b). Here the claim is analytical: whether such expectations restrict a particular service, and with what consequences, requires evidence about its contracts, routines and users' experiences.

Evaluation makes the distribution of authority especially visible. Attendance, referrals and health outcomes may provide useful evidence, while participants may also value reduced stigma, restored relationships or greater influence over everyday decisions. Asking who selects and interprets indicators connects methodological rigour to participatory accountability. It does not imply that any one form of evidence is sufficient, or that all community organisations distribute evaluative authority in the same way.

6 Comparative Discussion

The comparison concerns the institutional location of participation and translation. Published accounts provide different kinds of evidence: Taft (2019) examines a movement and its changing political language, while Machín (2010), Machado and Boarini (2013) and Machín Ramírez (2016) examine intervention principles, policy development and organisational networking. The following discussion interprets these accounts through common questions without treating them as equivalent observations or evidence of a shared historical cause.

6.1 Structural Interpretation

Both fields resist isolating individual conduct from its institutional context. Working children's movements connect work to poverty, informal labour, unequal education and inadequate social protection. Harm-reduction and ECO2-informed responses connect drug-related suffering to violence, insecure housing, stigma, fragmented services and punitive policy (Taft, 2019; Machado & Boarini, 2013; Machín, 2010). In both cases, transnational governance forms part of the structure: international child-labour standards influence permissible activity, while drug-control regimes shape national law and the institutional space for public-health responses.

The differences concern the decisions through which each problem is governed. In the children's field, a central dispute concerns how institutions interpret protection and whose account of work informs that interpretation. In the drug-response field, a central dispute concerns the conditions under which care is available and whether support requires conformity with abstinence-oriented or punitive expectations. These distinctions identify different professional tasks, including facilitating representation, assessing risk, widening service access and coordinating support. They do not establish that social workers occupy a single role within either field.

Structural interpretation can consequently change the object of professional judgement. An assessment of a child's work needs to consider material alternatives as well as the activity itself; an assessment of service access needs to consider institutional barriers as well as an individual's behaviour. Neither move removes the obligation to address immediate harm. It makes the adequacy of protection or care dependent on the conditions that intervention can actually change. This is the point at which a critical historical orientation becomes useful to the comparison, without being treated as a proven genealogy.

6.2 Participation and Collective Agency

Protagonismo makes collective self-representation an explicit political claim. Peer participation in harm reduction can instead be organised through outreach, services and local networks. These forms need to be distinguished by the decisions participants can influence. A peer worker delivering a predefined intervention may have considerable practical discretion but little control over eligibility or funding. Equally, a movement's claim to represent working children does not establish that every participant can influence its agenda. Organisational form is therefore an entry point for examining authority, not a sufficient measure of it.

In both fields, participation is meaningful only when it affects problem definition, priorities, decisions and evaluation. Social workers may create access to institutions and resources but may also displace experiential knowledge through professional authority. In children's movements this risk is especially visible as adultism; in the drugs field it appears through clinical, legal or managerial classifications.

Two failures of participation become analytically distinguishable. Institutions may hear a constituency while retaining exclusive control over the categories through which its claims are assessed. Alternatively, they may involve participants in delivery while retaining exclusive control over the conditions of support. Both arrangements can be described as participatory, although neither necessarily redistributes the relevant decision. The practical implication is to specify the decision at issue and the means by which participants can challenge or revise it, rather than treating consultation, representation and implementation as equivalent achievements.

6.3 Critical Translation of Global Norms

The objects of translation differ across the selected accounts. Working children's movements interpret children's rights in relation to organised claims about work, dignity, protection and participation (Taft, 2019). Community-based drug responses interpret intervention principles in relation to the organisation of care and its institutional possibilities (Machín, 2010; Machado & Boarini, 2013). The contrast is one of emphasis, not an exclusive division: children's movements also negotiate services, and harm-reduction initiatives also make rights claims.

The Third Space lens clarifies that such translation does not produce harmonious synthesis. Third-sector organisations may mediate between professional standards, global governance and locally embedded knowledge, but donor interests and institutional constraints shape which interpretations are recognised (van der Hoek, 2026b). Critical translation therefore asks who can modify a framework, whose knowledge acquires legitimacy and which adaptations receive resources.

This distinction helps specify the limits of local adaptation. An organisation may adapt its language and delivery arrangements while leaving the authority to define legitimate needs unchanged. Conversely, recognition of a political claim may have little practical effect if resources and referral arrangements remain inaccessible. Translation should therefore be examined at both levels: changes in the interpretation of a problem and changes in the organisational conditions of response. Neither local terminology nor the circulation of an international model is sufficient evidence that both have occurred.

6.4 Power-Sensitive Transnationalism

Transnational networks create opportunities for exchange and advocacy in both fields. Accounts of Kundapur describe a forum in which organised working children articulated demands across national contexts (International Labour Organization, 2006; Miljeteig, 2000). The RAISSS study describes cross-border organisation around a shared meta-model and public-policy advocacy (Machín Ramírez, 2016). Their representational bases differ: visibility for children's organisations and visibility for organisations providing community support are not the same form of participation.

Both fields also depend on material resources. Travel, language, administration, funding and access to policy forums influence who participates continuously and who becomes recognised as representative. Transnationality therefore does not itself create horizontal cooperation. Social

workers can use institutional access to amplify marginalised claims, but they can also become gatekeepers translating local experience into categories preferred by funders or policymakers.

The comparison suggests that reciprocal exchange requires scrutiny of these representational relationships. When an organisation translates local experience into an international declaration, training framework or funding proposal, it also selects which claims will travel. A relevant professional question is whether the people whose experiences are represented can contest that selection and influence the subsequent use of resources. This question applies to both fields without assuming that all networks reproduce the same inequalities.

Professional mediation is consequently both a resource and a possible constraint. Knowledge of institutional procedures can help secure recognition, services and support. It can also place professionals in a position to decide which claims count as credible or feasible. The relevant contrast is not between mediation and an imagined absence of intermediaries, but between arrangements in which mediation remains answerable to affected people and arrangements in which it becomes a substitute for their influence.

These distinctions specify the article's extension of the earlier regional synthesis (van der Hoek, 2026a). The comparison shifts the question from whether practice values participation and contextual knowledge to which decisions participants can influence, which institutional conditions remain fixed, and who can challenge those limits. The four dimensions identify different aspects of this problem. They form a conceptual guide for comparative inquiry, not an instrument whose validity or explanatory superiority has been empirically established.

7 Conclusion

This article has examined how a comparative reading informed by reconceptualisation can clarify the forms and limits of participation in transnational social work. Its central distinction concerns influence over the definition of a problem and influence over the institutional conditions of response. The selected accounts of working children's movements foreground collective representation and the interpretation of protection; the accounts of community-based drug responses foreground access to care, networks and the legitimacy of intervention. Both also involve the other set of questions. Their comparison makes it possible to locate authority more precisely than a general appeal to participatory or context-sensitive practice allows.

Five orienting principles follow. First, historical and contextual specificity requires attention to the institutions and social relations through which a problem becomes actionable. Second, structural and rights-based interpretation connects immediate support to material conditions while maintaining protection and care as obligations. Third, participation should be assessed in relation to identifiable decisions, including who defines priorities, sets conditions, allocates resources, and evaluates outcomes. Consultation, collective representation and peer involvement can contribute in different ways, but their presence alone does not demonstrate shared authority.

Fourth, critical translation requires examination of both normative interpretation and organisational arrangements. Locally adapted language does not necessarily change access to support, while expanded access does not necessarily give participants a voice in defining the problem. Fifth, transnational cooperation should make representation and professional mediation accountable to the people whose claims circulate. These principles offer questions for professional reflection and future research rather than a uniform intervention model.

The analysis is limited by its selective source base and the different evidentiary purposes of the texts compared. Historical discussion emphasises the Southern Cone, while the contemporary examples draw on Peru, Mexico and Brazil. The sources do not permit a representative account of the region, a test of causal descent from reconceptualisation, or an assessment of comparative effectiveness. Several accounts describe earlier periods and cannot establish present organisational conditions. The discussion's distinctions between forms of authority are conceptual interpretations whose usefulness requires examination in particular settings.

Further research could trace a specific decision across the relationships between participants, professionals, public institutions and transnational partners. Relevant evidence would include how a problem was defined, which alternatives were considered, who could alter eligibility or resource decisions, and how disagreement affected the outcome. Such inquiry would test where professional mediation expands participation and where it restricts it. Reconceptualisation remains relevant as a resource for asking these questions because it links professional judgement to social conditions, rights and power. Its value here lies in enabling a differentiated comparison, rather than in supplying a common origin or a completed regional doctrine.

Research Materials

The analysis uses published literature and public policy documents identified in the references. No participants were recruited, and no primary participant data were collected.

AI Assistance

OpenAI ChatGPT, accessed in September 2026, assisted with language revision, bibliographic checking, and the organisation of the conceptual argument. No primary research data were generated. Responsibility for the interpretation and final text rests with the author.

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