

Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation

**CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING:
WHY DO IT, WHEN TO DO IT,
HOW TO DO IT**

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Children's participation in decision making: Why do it, When to do it, How to do it

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INTRODUCTION

People's participation in public decision making has become increasingly established in a variety of political systems. Children are now beginning to add their ideas and actions. Decision makers and opinion leaders are asking what children's participation means and why it is essential.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which has been ratified by all but two member states, establishes the rights of children in three important areas: provision, protection and participation.

Everyone would surely agree that provision of health care, shelter and education is essential to children's well-being. In recent years, governments and civil society – not forgetting the mass media – have focused on fulfilling children's rights to protection from abuse, violence and exploitation. But participation is often seen as something new – and perhaps difficult to carry out.

This booklet shows how to put children's participation into practice. It is for everyone in roles of public leadership and service, answering questions about how and when children's participation is needed. Links to further resources are also provided.

Growth of the idea of public participation

'Public participation' began to be promoted as an idea in the 1970s and 1980s. A variety of politicians, researchers and philosophers argued that governments should listen to, and act on, the views of citizens in order to deal with social problems – such as poverty – and deliver public services more effectively.

Participation is widely viewed as the key to ensuring that public services meet community needs. Through participation, people feel ownership of plans and solutions. Such processes also encourage transparency and accountability of institutions intended to serve the public.

Participation is now part of the global 'good governance' agenda, within the reach of all people everywhere.

ONE: CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION – DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

Understanding children's participation means being clear about some key ideas.

Who is a child?

The UNCRC established that a child is a human being under the age of 18 years.

What is participation?

The definition of 'children's participation' is not rigid. Around the world, children are increasingly taking part in public decisions. They are speaking out at local, national and international forums, and working for common causes within different cultural traditions and political systems.

In the context of this booklet, 'participation' refers to public processes in which people are involved in decision making, either directly or through representatives. Participation is meaningful when:

- Public information is widely available;
- Many views are taken into account through a variety of methods, including discussions, surveys and referendums;
- Decisions are made cooperatively, through the joint formulation of plans and policies, and in the shared management of institutions and services.

What is children's participation?

Children's civil rights are guaranteed in the UNCRC, along with rights to health care, education, leisure time and protection from abuse, exploitation and violence. Children have a right to participate by expressing their opinions on decisions that affect their lives. For example, when a guardian is appointed for a child outside family care, it is now common for a court of law to listen to a child's wishes before making a decision.

Children also have the right to organize themselves to represent their own interests, depending on the prevailing political system and culture. Some countries have set up structures for children that are copies of adult institutions, such as youth councils or children's parliaments. These are channels for children's views to be made known, and also provide opportunities to learn citizenship skills. Another approach is to introduce planning and budgeting processes that involve children in choosing priorities alongside adults. Sometimes governments adopt consumer-oriented approaches, such as focus groups and surveys, to discover children's preferences – for example, as users of public services.

Children's participation is not best achieved through inviting them to major events and conferences nor by involving them in a single piece of research. To be most effective, participation requires widespread changes in political and institutional structures, as well as in attitudes, values and cultural practices, so that children are recognized as citizens and stakeholders in the present – not just in the future.

What the UNCRC says about children's participation

Some articles in the UNCRC relate directly to children's participation:

- Article 12 – Children's opinions must be listened to seriously in all matters that affect their lives. This includes decisions made by courts and judges.
- Article 13 – Children have the right to express themselves freely and to access information, subject to prevailing laws.
- Article 15 – Children have the right to freedom of association, subject to prevailing laws.

The full text of the UNCRC is found at <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

Other articles relate indirectly to children's participation:

Article 5 – Parents and guardians will provide direction and guidance to children, while respecting the 'evolving capacities' of the child.

Article 9 – Children shall not be separated from their families without the right to make their views known.

Article 17 – Children have the right to information that is beneficial for them, in their own languages and appropriate to their level of understanding.

Article 29 – Children have the right to education that promotes respect for others in a free society.

What the UNCRC does not say

The UNCRC does not establish a minimum age for children's participation. Rather, it refers to children's 'evolving capacities' to be involved in decisions that affect them.

The UNCRC does not give children the right to veto decisions made by adults, but it does require adults to seek out children's views, and to take them into account.

TWO: WHY CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IS IMPORTANT

Children's participation makes sense, not only because it is their right, but also because it is useful, educational and just.

Useful

Public services and facilities are used by children and affect their welfare. Some, such as schools and hostels, may provide services especially for children. Others, such as transport and health services, count large numbers of children among their customers. When users are involved in the development and operation of services, it is more likely that they will be well-targeted, appropriate and efficient.

Children's participation improves a centre for street children in Cambodia

We opened the centre ... After 10 days, all the children had left except one. This is when the team and I learnt our first and most important lesson: our mistake was that we thought we knew what was best for the children and wanted to provide what we thought they needed. We had bought mattresses; they wanted to sleep on the tiles, because they were cooler. We had prepared a classroom; the young people did not care about literacy, they wanted a job. We learned to listen to the children and, from then on, they have been guiding our work.

Sebastian Marot, in Brown, S., ed., 2004, *The best of friends: The restaurant*, Mith Samlanh, Phnom Penh, pp. 14-15.

Child-protection outcomes improve when children's opinions are listened to. For example, a child who participated in an NGO children's club expressed her satisfaction that the club had been able to persuade her parents not to send her to work when the family income dropped suddenly.

Participation in children's club gets a child factory worker back in school

... I was forced to a drop out of school and work in the garment factory. They made me work 12 hours a day. I really don't want other children to experience the same problem that I did. I want them to know that they have rights, rights to continue their study at school, and rights to voice out their concerns ... My mother was raised to believe that daughters should not study too much. Now she tells all the neighbours that even if there's nothing to eat at home she'll support me to complete my study.

Channy Kut, Kompong Speu province, Cambodia, in *Our Voice*, World Vision Cambodia (2007) Phnom Penh, p. 2, accessible at http://www.wvasiapacific.org/images/Publications/our_voice_07.pdf.

Educational

Children's participation is education for adult life. The practice of participation in childhood develops adults who are responsible, fair and respectful of the opinions of others.

Children and government officials seek new solutions together in Thailand

[The government officials] tried to answer our questions. Even though they could not always answer them well, I don't think it matters. What matters is their attitude toward our questions. As long as they think it valuable ... [and] can think our suggestions over, that is enough.

Tracy, participant at the 2007 Mekong Youth Forum in Bangkok on trafficking in Fry, E., 2007, 'Tomorrow's Advocates', *Bangkok Post*, 9 September 2007, accessible at <http://www.humantrafficking.org/updates/718>

Just

Millions of children worldwide care for other children, the sick and the elderly in their families and communities. Children may take on heavy burdens of housework, farm chores and income generation. They are clearly active citizens. Yet governments often view children as a cost to society. It is just and fair that their contributions are acknowledged and that they too have a say in how society is managed.

Children provide their views of government actions in India

When we learnt that the first periodic report of Government of India was due for submission, we felt that we needed to review this report ... We working children can and should participate in solving the problems affecting us ... We know our situation well.

Alternate Report submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Indian National Movement of Street and Working Children, India, July 2003, <http://www.workingchild.org/prota12.htm>

THREE: WHEN TO INTRODUCE CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Public leaders can take steps to begin or improve children's participation in national life by assessing the structures currently available.

To know where to begin, work through the check lists below, which show how children's participation can improve citizenship for everyone.

Justice

- Can children express their views on institutionalization, adoption, custody and guardianship?
- Do law courts have children-friendly processes?
- Are children protected from being victimized during interrogation procedures?
- Is legal information freely available to children, in ways they easily understand?
- Are children able to inherit assets, and benefit from them?

Participation ideas: Children could participate in a judicial review of family and inheritance laws. Children's focus groups can comment on current court procedures, to see if they can be improved to serve the needs of children better. Legal-aid and children's-rights organizations may be able to work together with government to ensure that key areas of law are made known to children through appropriate media.

Health

- Are children's views required for decisions about their own health?
- Does every child have access to health care, even if their families are unable to pay?
- Do children have power to give or withhold consent to treatment?
- Are children involved in planning health services?
- Is health information freely available to children, in ways they easily understand?

Participation ideas: Information on nutrition, hygiene and safe practices may be piloted and tested by children with the help of community organizations, especially those led by children. Similarly, the monitoring of children's health status could include children themselves in planning and carrying out activities. Clinics and hospital could consult children when seeking to make improvements to their services. Children have the right to consent to medical treatment, in consultation with their families.

Education

- Is every child entitled to go to school?
- Do working children have access to an education that is suitable for their needs?
- Is education free?
- Can children express their views at school?

Participation ideas: Many innovative programmes around the world have successfully increased access to schooling for disadvantaged children through child-to-child programmes to increase school access and retention. Children can also participate in reviews of curriculum and development of teaching materials. School governance can include children through special committees and student representatives.

Community Services

- Are children included in household decisions?
- Are children-headed households recognized and supported?
- Are children-led associations accepted as a part of civil society?
- Is every child registered at birth?
- Are working children recognized and supported?

Participation ideas: Indicators on household economic status and well-being should include separate data on under-18 members – both boys and girls. Small grants or awards to children-led organizations could provide endorsement and encouragement to those involved. Children can participate in gathering data, for example on the situation of child workers or children in remote areas.

Information

- Do children have access to newspapers, radio, television and internet to communicate their own views and learn from others?
- Are children's views routinely heard in the media, in open forums and by government committees that seek public input?

Participation ideas: Training courses can enable children to participate as users as well as consumers of media. Children's access to print and electronic materials may be encouraged through subsidies and the removal or scaling down of taxes on such items.

Check list of key entry points

There are many aspects of governance and public management in which children can participate, without waiting for a major change in public policy. This is because the legal and institutional frameworks for children's participation usually already exist. Children could be encouraged to use them through public campaigns, as well as with the support of civil-society organizations that promote children's participation. For example:

- Gathering data on public issues;
- Planning policy changes;
- Making plans and budgets;
- Monitoring the quality of services and facilities;
- Evaluating the success of policies, programmes or services.

E-governance for children's participation

'E-governance' is becoming a reality as governments and organizations take steps to reduce the gap between people who have access to digital technology, and those who do not.

The increasing use of internet communications, email and mobile phones has considerable potential for children's participation. In countries where internet use is widespread, younger people are the most enthusiastic users. Even in poorer countries, mobile phones and SMS messaging are used widely, enabling networks to organize themselves in ways that were not possible before.

Government agencies are now able to post information online at little cost, and to use online discussions and electronic polls as means of discovering children's views.

Everyone has a role in children's participation

All public leaders and administrators can play a role in promoting and improving children's participation in public life.

What legislators can do

- Review existing legislation to see how far it is consistent with the participation principles in the UNCRC. This goes beyond family law. Other areas such as economic development, education, health, criminal law, labour, trade, social welfare, child-care, immigration and taxation policies all have impact on children;
- Seek input from civil society, including children's representatives, on any proposed changes;
- Establish a standing committee to plan and implement children's participation;
- Ensure implementation costs are reflected in national budgets, including provision for seeking children's opinions;
- Promote children's participation in articles and public speeches;
- Visit – and learn from – civil-society programmes that use participatory principles to work with children, or that are co-managed with children.

What administrators can do

- Establish clear targets for increasing children's participation, and report on them;
- Implement awareness-raising campaigns so that all citizens know about the changes, and children are able and prepared to take part;
- Introduce (and publicize) inspiring pilot programmes that actively solicit children's views and provide space for children to take leadership roles on issues that concern them;
- Incorporate children-friendly methods of gathering children's views, based on the experience of researchers and civil-society workers who use participatory techniques;
- Ensure that complaint procedures can be accessed by children as well as by adults.

What the media can do

- Treat children and their views with respect;
- Report on any steps the government is taking to include children's views in decision making;
- Include children's views when covering public issues including (but not limited to) transport, education, health and community services;
- Facilitate children's participation in writing and broadcasting.

FOUR: MAKING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION EFFECTIVE

Dispelling myths about children's participation

Myth: Children are easily manipulated, so we should protect them from politics.

The answer is not to exclude children, but to have appropriate safeguards and standards. The practice of participation improves skills in representing views clearly.

Myth: Children are represented by their elders, so there is no problem.

Children do not always see things in the same way as adults do. Their point of view is valuable.

Myth: Child representatives do not represent other children, so we should not include them.

Fair and inclusive ways for children's representation can be devised, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

Myth: Children do not remain children, but will grow up, so the problem will resolve itself.

Public processes should involve younger children routinely, so that the practice of participation is institutionalized.

Organizing quality participation takes time. There is a danger of imposing burdens on children without recognizing that adults also have responsibilities. Remembering some key principles, and referring to successful examples of children's participation, will help to ensure that their participation is effective in the long term.

- **Realize that there is no single 'correct' method of children's participation.** Much depends on cultural norms, politics and systems of governance. Each country and area will develop its own way. The point is to keep moving forward.
- **Recognize that adults have important duties.** Adults have a duty to listen and respond, and a duty to protect children's interests. Participation can expose children to threats they have not faced before, when they leave home or are the subject of media interviews. Take reasonable precautions.
- **Avoid tokenism.** It has become common to feature child speakers at large conferences, but such arrangements usually fail to shape policies. It is more effective to start with participation at local levels, where it is more meaningful for everyone. If children are invited to meetings where adults do not listen to their views, or where they present plans but receive no response, they often become disillusioned and angry. This does not build a positive view of citizenship and public service. If children do attend public meetings, ensure there is appropriate follow up.

- **Make sure child leaders have a strong community base and peer support.** Children's participation becomes more credible and respected when child leaders are clearly legitimate representatives of a group.

There are obvious differences in power and status between children and adults. These can be minimized. Adults should receive training, so that they know how to work with children in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The most effective children's participation occurs when it is part of the normal way of taking public decisions. Contrasting approaches have led to similar results of children being involved in public decision making. In India, one non-governmental organization began working with children in the 1970s and subsequently took on a supporting role, as children took the lead in setting directions for their work. Eventually, a parallel institution evolved, through which the children could relate with formal government structures. In Brazil, local authorities experienced in adult participation began to draw children into their structures. Children now allocate part of the municipal budget according to their priorities.

Careful preparation is needed to ensure genuine participation. Large international conferences, in particular, present challenges for young delegates. It is important to allow sufficient preparation time and a realistic budget. While travelling, adults should ensure a safe environment for under-18 delegates and provide genuine choices, for example, in the case of whether or not a child wishes to speak to the media. Staff and volunteers responsible for children's welfare must be briefed and trained in participatory methods, as well as adequately supported and monitored.

Children's participation in public decision making is still relatively new. In the future, the days when children had no public voice will come to seem quaint and old-fashioned. The way forward is clear and, with every step, new possibilities appear.

Once they are over 18 years of age, young people who have been involved can mentor younger children.

Myth: No one else is interested in children's participation.

Almost every country in the world has ratified the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. This indicates an agreement and commitment to incorporate children's participation in public decision making.

Myth: Children participate when they speak at adult conferences.

The process leading to a conference should be participatory – children should not deliver speeches prepared for them by adults. They should be heard, and their opinions taken into account. Children can also participate by organizing, monitoring and giving feedback.

Sources: UNICEF, State of the world's children 2003; G. Lansdown, Promoting children's participation, 2001; Save the Children Sweden, Easier to say than do, 2007.

Detailed guidelines on involving children in public events, prepared by international agencies with experience of working with children, are available at <http://www.iawgcp.com>.

Children as campaigners – Bhima Sangha, Karnataka, India

Bhima Sangha represents 13,000 children in Karnataka state. It emerged in 1990 out of fieldwork done in the city of Bangalore by a local NGO, The Concerned for Working Children. One of their earliest campaigns petitioned the government for safe working conditions, after a 1991 explosion in a fireworks factory had killed 40 child workers. Since then, Bhima Sangha has conducted its own research and campaigns on a range of issues, including community consumption of alcohol, child marriage and access to education.

In 1995, the group launched Makkala Panchayats, or children's governments, in five districts. They encouraged all village children in the area to take part in elections to choose a representative forum of child councillors. Reserved seats for girls and children with disabilities were included on the council. The Makkala Panchayats are a structure through which children represent their concerns to the government.

Supportive adults played a role through an accompanying task force, selected from local government officials and an adult 'children's friend' (Makkala Mitra) who work together to access the resources that the children need to do the work. In its own literature, the group reports that these 'linking structures' to formal government networks have been important to its success.

Bhima Sangha has been involved in representing concerns at national and international levels, through consultations with other unions of working children and making recommendations to the United Nations General Assembly, Special Session on Children in 2002.

Giske, A., 2003, 'Literature Review', *Bhima Sangha and the Makkala Panchayats: Chroniclers of our own histories*, The International Institute for Child Rights and Development, Canada, accessible at <http://www.uvic.ca/iicrd/graphics/CWC%20final%20report2.pdf>.

Children as city councillors, Barra Mansa, Brazil

The children's council in Barra Mansa grew out of a series of municipal programmes in 1997, supported by the Barra Mansa Council and the United Nations Urban Management Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean on the theme 'Citizenship Knows No Age'. The initial programmes included awareness-raising activities on consumer rights, tax collection and public budgets. These programmes led to a wider series of assemblies at neighbourhood, district and municipal levels in which child representatives between the ages of nine and 15 years were selected by their peers.

At the municipal level, there are now 36 elected child councillors – 18 girls and 18 boys. Representatives must be school-going children aged nine years and above. A proportion of the city budget is reserved for them to allocate on projects and facilities. Over time, these have included repairs to equipment in public schools, improvement of playground facilities and tree planting.

Supportive adults have played an important role in these arrangements. They have been drawn from the city council itself, the mayor's office, the municipal secretary of education, public and private schools, neighbourhood councils and advisors and volunteers from a local NGO, Encomen. Their roles have included training facilitators for the assemblies, and making arrangements for visits to other neighbourhoods.

Guerra, E., 2005, 'Citizenship Knows No Age: Children's Participation in the Governance and Municipal Budget of Barra Mansa, Brazil', *Children, Youth and Environments*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 151-168.

FIVE: LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS

Child-to-Child network online resources on promoting children's participation for health and development, <http://www.child-to-child.org/>

Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region, 2007, *Minimum Standards for consulting with children*, Bangkok, <http://www.iawgcp.com>

Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region, 2007, *Children as active citizens: A policy and programme guide*, Bangkok, <http://www.iawgcp.com>

Lansdown, G., 2001, *Promoting children's participation in democratic decision making*, Florence, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight6.pdf>

Madden, S., 2001, *Re:Action Consultation Toolkit*, produced by Save the Children UK on behalf of the Scottish Executive's Action Programme for Youth, available for download from http://create-scotland.co.uk/docs/reaction_toolkit.pdf

New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, *Participation Kit*, available for download at www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/participationkit.cfm

Theis, J., *Indicators for children's citizenship and civil rights*, Bangkok, Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region, <http://www.iawgcp.com>

Van Beers, H., Invernizzi, A., Milne, B., eds., 2006, *Beyond Article 12: Essential readings in children's participation*, Bangkok, Black on White Publications. <http://www.knowingchildren.org/reading.php>

