

Children's Participation in Development Cooperation

An illustration of two children sitting in a hot air balloon basket. The basket is woven and contains a pink bag and a brown bag. The balloon is orange and white striped. The children are smiling. The background is a light blue sky with white clouds and a green landscape with trees and hills. A large blue shape is on the left side of the image.

Getting ready for the journey
of child participation



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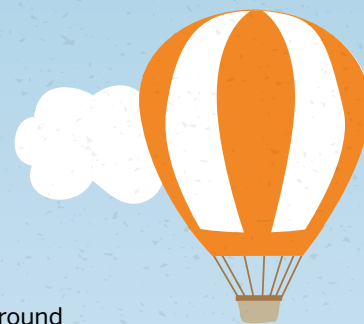
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Introduction



The right of children and young people to participate in matters affecting them is one of the cornerstones of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Yet there are limited opportunities for children and young people to ethically participate in decision-making processes at local, regional, national and international level. There are only few organisations and/or projects that sufficiently ensure meaningful and ethical participation of children in the field of cooperation and humanitarian assistance.

The reasons why child participation, that is since decades anchored in the UNCRC, has not taken off are diverse. Often there is little knowledge about child participation concepts and implementation as well as misleading interpretations and understandings rooted in socio-cultural contexts and traditions, to only name some of the reasons. Many practitioners find it challenging to start child participation in their complex organisational structures, having in mind that child participation requires economical funds, knowledge and training, time and personal resources. Ethical and sustainable participation of children doesn't come easy. This booklet encourages taking off the journey of child participation. Its chapters have been adapted to a child-friendly situation analysis tool – the Hot Air Balloon. This visual tool is usually used with children to analyse a challenge, set a goal, and explore strengths, risks and their mitigation. In this case we will explore the concept and practice of child participation.

Hopefully it will also help to get you ready to embark on the journey of child participation in your work!

About the workshop

On May 21 and 22, 2019 Kindernothilfe invited German-based non-governmental organisations and foundations to a workshop on children's participation in International Development Cooperation. The training and exchange workshop was supported by ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL with funding from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The two-day workshop provided the participants with the basic conceptual knowledge, methods and tools for meaningful participation of children in development cooperation projects, campaigns and advocacy work. In addition, participants were given an opportunity to share their own experiences on children's participation and to share best practice, discuss challenges and define ways to further promote it at organisational and inter-organisational levels.

This booklet is an overview of the workshops input and discussions, also sharing ideas and experiences by the participants. Ultimately this publication can serve as an introduction to children's participation, and an adjustable guideline on child participation in planning processes.

The Grass – the basis

Short history of children's rights

1923

Eglantyne Jebb, a British teacher drafts the Declaration of the Rights of the Child which is adopted by the International Save the Children Union she founded

1924

League of Nations adopts the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, known as the Geneva Declaration

1946

The United Nations adopt the Geneva Declaration

1948

The United Nations adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and realise shortcomings in the Geneva Declaration

1959

The United Nations draft and adopt an expanded version of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child

1989

The United Nations member states unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

2019

196 states (all states except for the USA) ratified the UNCRC

The Signpost – the background

Participation is a human right. Like adults, children have civil rights to information, expression, participation and association which need to be respected. Further to that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the key international convention promulgating children's participation rights. **Article 12 of the UNCRC** specifies:

“State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

The right of the child to be heard is linked with other civil rights and freedoms declared in the UNCRC: Art.13 (freedom of expression), Art. 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Art. 15 (freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly), Art. 16 (right to the protection of the law), Art. 17 (access to information), Art. 23 (rights of children with disabilities). Other principles must also be carefully considered when applying children's right to participation including the UNCRC general principles Art. 2 (non-discrimination), Art. 3 (best interests), and Art. 6 (inherent right to life).

Children's participation is not a one-off activity or programme, but a process that requires integration in all spheres of life and transformation of power relations between children and adults. In many socio-cultural contexts it necessitates a cultural shift that recognises children and adolescents as active agents, rather than passive recipients of care and protection. In sum, children's participation is a **goal**, a **principle** and a **means** that needs to be taken into account when considering how to implement other children's rights.

- › Participation as a goal to strengthen the active role of children in society.
- › Participation of children as the guiding principle of all activities and as a key principle of a child rights-based approach to programming.
- › Participation of children as a means to promote the right to life, development and protection.



The Compass – child participation theories

Academics and experts on children's rights have developed theories and models on child participation. The theories by Roger Hart, Laura Lundy and Gerison Lansdown are probably the most well-known.

Hart (1997) conceptualised child participation as a process and defined different levels of involvement and participation of children and youth:

8. Young people's initiative, decisions made in partnership with adults
7. Young people's initiative and leadership
6. Adults' initiative, joint decisions
5. Adults make decisions, young people are consulted and informed
4. Young people are assigned tasks and informed how and why they are involved in a project
3. Participation for show – young people have little or no influence on their activities
2. Decoration – young people help implement adults's initiatives
1. Manipulation – adults use young people to support their own projects and pretend they are the result of young peoples's inspiration

Lundy (2007) developed a model of participation that conceptualised Art. 12 of the UNCRC, focussing on four interrelated elements:

- > Space: Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.
- > Voice: children should be provided with information and facilitated to express their views.

- > Audience: children's views must be listened to.
- > Influence: children's views must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Lansdown (2011) describes in "Every Child's Right to be Heard" different forms of participation:

- > **Consultative participation:**
Adults seek children's views in order to build knowledge and understanding of their lives and experiences. The participation is often characterised by being adult-initiated, adult-led and -managed and lacking any possibility for children to influence outcomes.
- > **Collaborative participation:**
A greater degree of partnership between adults and children can be achieved by ensuring that children have the opportunity for active engagement at any stage of the decision-making process.
- > **Child-led participation:**
Children and youth have space and opportunity to initiate activities and advocate for themselves on issues affecting them. The participation is often characterised by issues of concern being identified by the children themselves, adults serving only as facilitators and children controlling the process.

The Sun – the importance of children's participation

Children are experts in their own lives who are capable of identifying their needs and forming an own opinion. Hence, in order to be able to act in their best interest, it is pivotal to give children a voice and involve them in decision-making processes on matters affecting them. It can be beneficial to adopt a life-cycle approach to child participation, building upon each stage in of child development.

Child development

Increased child protection

Better decision-making and outcomes

Increased accountability

Civic engagement and active citizenship

Further reasons for Children's Participation:

- › Increases sustainability of the project/programme
- › Increased legitimacy by including children
- › Increased ownership
- › Increased implementation of a child rights-based approach

The Balloon – the components of meaningful participation of children

To plan and monitor participation, nine basic requirements for effective and ethical participation of children have been elaborated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in the General Comment No. 12 on the Child's Right to be Heard.

1. Transparent and informative

Children must be provided with full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about their right to express their views freely, how their views are to be given due weight, and how this participation will take place, its scope, purpose and potential impact.

2. Voluntary

Children must not be coerced into expressing views against their will and they must be informed that they can cease involvement at any stage.

3. Respectful

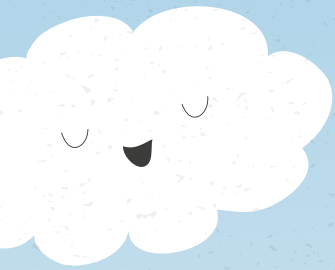
Children's views have to be treated with respect and they should be provided with opportunities to initiate ideas and activities. Adults working with children should acknowledge, respect and build on good examples of child participation. They also need an understanding of the socio-economic, environmental and cultural context of children's lives. Persons and organisations working for and with children need to respect children's views particularly in public events.

4. Relevant

The issues on which children have the right to express their views must be of real relevance to their lives and enable them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities. In addition, appropriate spaces need to be created where children are enabled to highlight and address the issues they themselves identify as relevant and important.

5. Child-friendly

Environments and working methods should be adapted to children's capacities. Adequate time and resources should be made available to ensure that children are adequately prepared and have the confidence and opportunity to contribute their views. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that children will need differing levels of support and forms of involvement according to their age and evolving capacities.



6. Inclusive

Participation must be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for marginalised children of either gender to be involved. Children are not a homogenous group and participation needs to provide equal opportunities for all without discrimination on any grounds. Programmes also need to ensure that they are culturally sensitive to children from all backgrounds.

7. Supported by training

Adults need preparation, skills and support to facilitate children's participation effectively. Children themselves can act as trainers and facilitators on how to promote effective participation although they require capacity-building to strengthen their skills.

8. Safe and sensitive to risk

In certain situations, expressing opinions and views may involve risks. Adults have a responsibility towards the children with whom they work and must take every precaution to minimise the risk of violence, exploitation or any other negative consequence of child participation. Children must be aware of their right to be protected from harm and know where to go for help if needed. Building an understanding of the value and implications of participation in communities and with involved families can minimise the risks to which children may otherwise be exposed.

9. Accountable

A commitment to follow-up and evaluation is essential. For example, in any research or consultative process, children must be informed as to how their views have been interpreted and used and, where necessary, provided with the opportunity to challenge and influence the analysis of the findings. Children are also entitled to be provided with a clear feedback on how their participation has influenced any outcomes. Wherever appropriate, children should be given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities.

The Basket – actors that can support meaningful child participation

There is a variety of actors that potentially can support meaningful child participation:

- > Family and friends, or alternative caregivers
- > Local structures including schools, churches and clubs
- > Media
- > Governments

- > Academics & Think Tanks
- > International organisations (e.g. UN agencies, international NGOs)
- > Civil society organisations
- > Children themselves



The Pegs – obstacles for and limitations of children’s participation



Financial resources

Implementing and ensuring meaningful participation of children in projects, programmes, campaigns or advocacy requires time and resources. Finances (and consequently personnel) especially within non-governmental organisations working in development cooperation are always limited and often scarce. Consistent and meaningful participation of children would require the involvement of children since the early stages of project design, but usually donors do not cover the financial resource to ensure this. Furthermore, knowledge and expertise in children’s participation are required to develop but also to implement, monitor and finally evaluate projects and programmes involving children. For example, sometimes resources are required for capacity building at the grassroots level prior to project implementation which has additional cost implications for a project or programme.



Knowledge & Tools

It was also voiced during the workshop that the know-how on child participation is still low. The resources available are few, and the publications on the implementation of children’s participation in projects are limited or not available in the respective local languages. Therefore, also the proposed participation methods are limited and often neglect inclusive methods or different contexts.



Context

Societal, cultural and religious contexts influence children’s participation heavily. The political, legal and soci-

etal circumstances might define whether it is safe to consult and involve children of a specific target group in a project. This might also influence whether the involvement of children in projects/programmes/campaigns is encouraged or avoided. Cultural and religious factors might affect the way girls and boys are (un)comfortable or even able to talk about and deal with certain topics and how they frame their ideas. The (il)literacy or physical and mental (dis)abilities of the children also have implications for how children communicate and participate, and discrimination is often a barrier to participation. Context analysis therefore is a requirement for meaningful participation of children, but again requires time and finances.



Target group

The access to a certain target group might also be constrained by the societal, cultural, religious, political and legal circumstances. For example, getting access and being able to involve child workers in a country with strict anti-child labour laws may be more difficult and might put children at risk. Another example are children of itinerant labourers who might be difficult to detect and involve in mid- or long-term projects simply because of their mobility. However, this is not exclusive to children who work, but also those on the move, affected by natural disasters, war, refugees, as well as forcibly displaced and stateless persons. Finally, projects that have a long-term goal, need to deal with the fact that children’s life situations change and that at a certain point they grow out of the target group.

The Clouds & the Rainbow – the risks of children's participation and their mitigation



As mentioned earlier the **environment and context** in which children grow up, can influence their availability to join a participatory process. Certain environments and contexts might even put children who participate in a project/programme/campaign at risk of physical abuse, verbal abuse or social exclusion. Therefore, it is extremely important to carefully assess the context and the potential risks and make arrangements to mitigate them. Children should be involved in risk assessment processes. Informing and involving key stakeholders, raising awareness on the importance of children's participation as well as developing and ensuring **safeguarding standards** are options to mitigate those risks.

Manipulation is another very common risk when involving children in any participatory process. Different stakeholders involved in the process might have diverging interests and may intentionally or unintentionally influence children's views and behaviour. For example, adults might subconsciously phrase issues in a way that children feel obliged to speak or behave in a certain way. In order to mitigate the risk of manipulation, it is crucial to work with the staff on different

dynamics of power sharing in children's participation, and to ensure ethical and effective participation of children.

Group dynamics within a group of children participating in a project might also be considered a risk. Jealousy or group pressure within the group can sometimes lead to violence, social exclusion or misinformation about the child's view. Trained adults are responsible for creating a safe space for the children to voice their opinions. Furthermore, they have to be attentive to recognise when a child is under pressure, frustrated or left behind in a participatory process, and must have the tools available to deal with these situations. Children and young people who are part of groups and participatory processes should also be encouraged to reflect on patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and to promote non-discriminatory ways of working.

Involving children in a participatory process also raises certain **expectations** within them. Not having these expectations fulfilled can cause frustration and might lead to the drop-out of a child. Therefore, a transparent expectation management together with the children is important.

The Suitcase – the organisational strengths supporting children’s participation



Organisations bring strengths and structures that help supporting children’s participation.

Identifying these existing structures can serve as a good starting point to strategically plan the increase of child participation in ongoing practice, or develop respective structures and strategies to do so. The following suggestions were collectively shared during the workshop and represent only a few of possible support structures, connecting elements and practice in your own organisation.

Organisations can built upon and develop meaningful ways of participation further in their:

- › Programme Cycle, e.g. Situation Analysis, Planning, Implementation, MEAL
- › Ethical Guidelines such as Child Safeguarding Policies & Standards
- › Child Rights-Based Approach
- › Capacity Building in organisation/with partners, e.g. child-friendly tools and methods
- › Advocacy work and platforms, e.g. collaborative and child-led mobilisation
- › Funding instruments, and provide funding themselves for child participation
- › (Inter-) Organisational knowledge exchange
- › Strengthening children’s groups and associations
- › Child Representation in both internal and external decision-making spaces

Wind – the opportunities to further support children's participation

Mainstreaming children's participation in all contexts of development cooperation where children are involved would be one of the central goals. Participants of the workshop mentioned their intent to raise awareness on children's participation in departments within their organisation that are not primarily focussed on children's rights. Some are currently planning internal workshops on the topic.

Consistent children's participation would be another goal in the institutional structure of the organisations that are involving and/or affecting them. In some organisations or departments such 'children advisory boards' or 'youth councils' are already in place. The participants of the workshop also expressed interest in further exchange to replicate this initiative.

During the workshop the participants identified many more opportunities to further support children's participation. There was a common wish for further exchange and cooperation on the topic. One idea was the establishment of a network, platform or forum that enables a regular exchange of best practices, experiences and tools for all organisations working with children's participation in the development cooperation sector.

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development currently established a website on children's rights, including a section on children's participation that includes a list of tools and methods that can be used for programmes, projects and campaigns. The website can be found at kinder-und-jugendrechte.de/kinderrechte/recht-auf-beteiligung.



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Are you ready to embark on your journey to meaningful child participation?

This booklet is for practitioners in development cooperation who are willing to board the Hot Air Balloon to child participation. By packing the organizational strengths in a suitcase, choosing the people who will join the journey, preparing the compass on finding the way to meaningful child participation and blowing away the cloudy risks that come with the journey.

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