



# Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level

A study on child and youth councils in UNICEF National Committee countries

Based on the views of child and youth council members in selected National Committee countries



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**Disclaimer:** This study is for research and knowledge enhancement and does not constitute formal programme guidance. The findings of this study have informed a shorter guidance document on working with child and youth councils at local level: **Child and Youth Councils: Guidance to Support Meaningful Participation.**

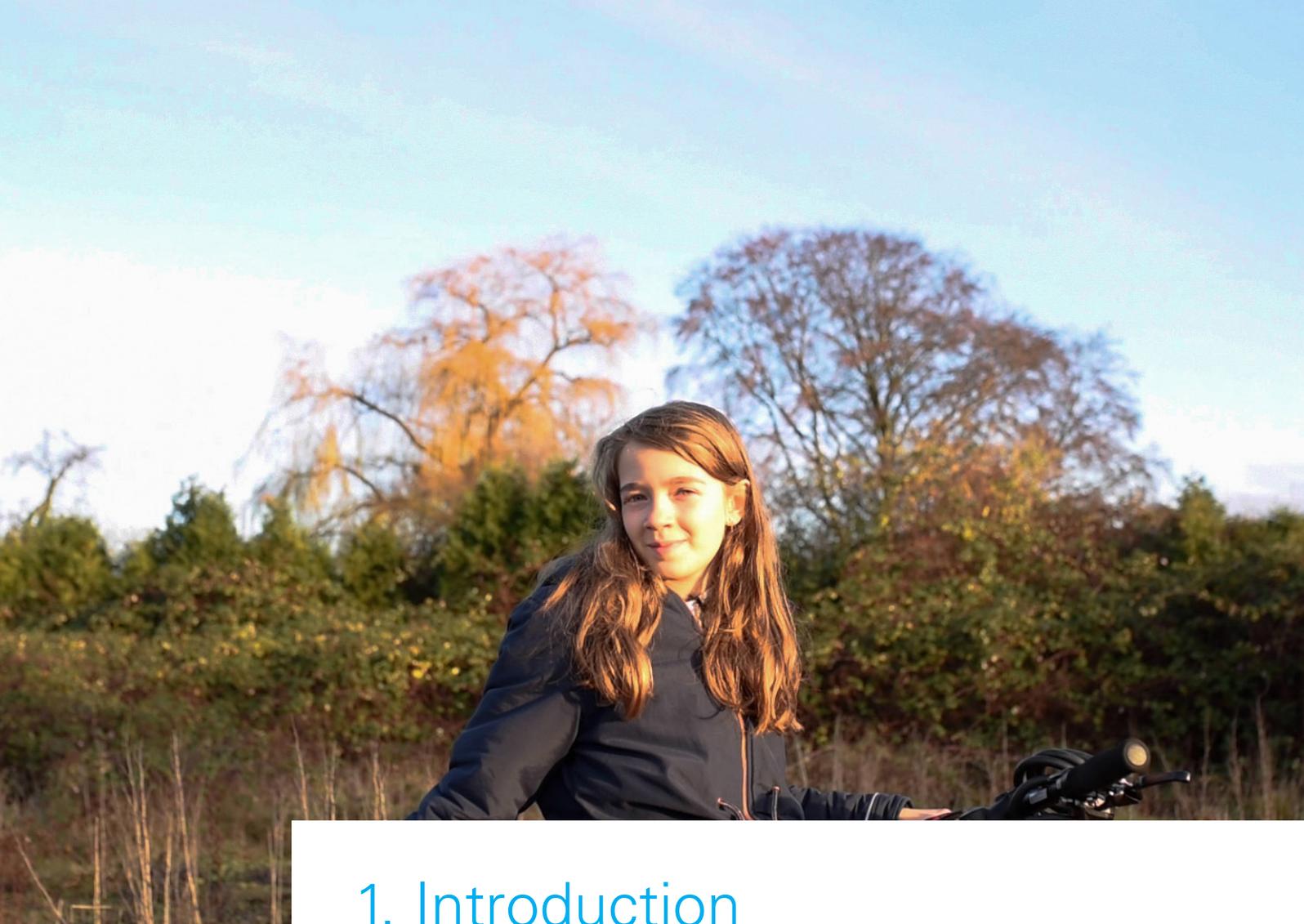
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# 1. Introduction

Local governments who wish to establish or strengthen formal participatory mechanisms for children are the target audience for this study. The material may be useful for countries of all income contexts. However, the study builds on evidence gathered from interviews undertaken in 2021 in 11 high-income countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, the Republic of Korea, Slovenia, and Spain). We interviewed children and supporting adults who are actively engaged in child and youth councils in schools and at the local level. Based on the research findings, the report provides practical suggestions that will enable local governments to fulfil better their obligations under Article 12 of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** to provide children the right to express their views on all matters of concern to them and to take seriously these views.

Many local governments have developed innovative and creative approaches to introduce mechanisms that enable children and young people to influence and inform decisions within their communities. This study intends to capture the learning from these experiences to support other local governments that are looking to achieve the same goal. To date, there is widespread concern that many local governments lack the necessary knowledge, resources, capacities, and monitoring capabilities to introduce meaningful participation at the local level.

Accordingly, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Develop a shared understanding of what constitutes effective, representative, and inclusive child participation.

2. Based on the findings, provide practical suggestions on the measures necessary to establish and maintain child and youth councils.
3. Provide concrete illustrative examples of children's experiences in child and youth councils.
4. Address some of the common challenges—for example, lack of awareness and understanding, inclusion, motivation, sustainability, monitoring, and evaluation—local governments face in establishing effective participation.

The target audience is local level stakeholders working with and for children and young people in high- and middle-income countries, including:

- UNICEF staff and associates
- Children and young people
- Staff in local governments

## NOTE:

1. **The study does not provide a rigorous step-by-step guideline on how to establish child and youth councils.** The situation varies so significantly in different countries, that there cannot be one single approach to this work. Rather, the study offers suggestions, ideas, and examples that children and organizers use and adapt for specific needs and contexts.
2. **The study does not seek to address the many other approaches to participation that can take place at the local level outside the formal structures of child and youth councils.** For example, child-led initiatives, online consultations, local projects run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local campaigns involving children or other informal participation mechanisms. The exclusive focus of this study is on formal mechanisms for child and youth participation at the local level.

## Lexicon of terms

Local councils for children and young people have different names both within and between countries. In addition, we use other terms to describe children of different ages, for example, child, youth, adolescents, young people. For convenience and consistency, we adopt the following language throughout this document:

- **School council:** A school council is an appointed body of pupils within a school (who may be elected by their peers) to represent the children in the school.
- **Child and youth council:** Child and youth councils are appointed bodies of children and young people (who may be elected by their peers) who represent children and young people. In this study, we focus on child and youth councils at municipal and regional levels.
- **Child or children:** A person under the age of 18.
- **Young person or young people:** A person between the ages of 14 to 25.

Where the age range is not explicit, the text refers to **children and young people**.

## Acronyms

<b>CFCI</b>	Child Friendly Cities Initiative
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>CNIAC</b>	National Council of Children and Adolescents of Catalonia



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## 2. Why child participation matters

The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 has increased the awareness and understanding that child participation is necessary. However, in many quarters, there is still significant resistance to recognizing that children are entitled to express their views and be taken seriously in matters affecting them. The following arguments can be used to make the case for the introduction of child participation mechanisms at the local level.

### 1) Understand child participation as a human right

Children have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, in addition to rights and freedoms to appropriate information, thought, expression, association and peaceful assembly. Children may exercise the right to participation in various ways, individually or in groups, including participation in decisions taken at home, at school or in the community, and this applies to all children capable of forming a view. This obligation is also reflected at the local level, and requires schools, communities, and cities to foster and enable child participation practices and structures and ensure that children can be heard safely and effectively.

### 2) Increase relevant programmes and improve services and policies

Children's knowledge about their own lives, their creativity, skills, and aspirations can be harnessed to inform the development and monitoring of more effective, relevant,

and sustainable services, policies, and practices.<sup>1</sup> Whether in child and youth councils, municipality-wide projects, public policies or legislation, child participation should allow for an adequate reflection of children's individual and collective needs, views of the world, responsibilities, and desires. Their engagement strengthens adult decision-making and results in more relevant, more effective, and more sustainable practices. For example:

- Services, ranging from transportation to healthcare, should address children's needs (see example from London Borough of Redbridge, UK, in [section 5.2](#)).
- Children and young people should drive local child and youth policy (see example from Avilés, Spain, in [section 6.1](#)).
- Legislation and policies should address and be responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable children and young people (see example from Cologne, Germany, in [section 5.2](#), and Prince George's County, USA, in [section 6.2](#)).

### **3) Enhance protection and non-discrimination**

Having both the right and the space to voice their views and to be heard are powerful means through which children can challenge discrimination, violence, exploitation, or injustice. Denying children the right to be heard and failing to put in place accessible and safe systems through which they can challenge violence and abuse has allowed for cultures and practices of abuse to be perpetuated with relative impunity.<sup>2</sup> In order to expose such abuses and prevent their recurrence, it is imperative that children are encouraged to speak up and have access to safe and accessible mechanisms of complaint and redress. Moreover, when children use these mechanisms of complaint, they must believe that they are heard, taken seriously, and that action will be taken. Protecting children is possible through the creation of safe cultural environments in which children build the confidence in all contexts to express their views.

### **4) Strengthen child development and well-being**

Childhood, particularly adolescence, is a critical period of rapid growth, learning, adaptation, and neurobiological development. Participatory opportunities enhance children's communication, problem-solving and negotiation skills and allow them to build better relationships and connectedness with their peers, families, and communities.<sup>3</sup> Consultations carried out in preparation for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development found that participation in development was one of the strongest aspirations of children. Children in over a quarter of the countries said that they want adults and decision-makers to listen to them.<sup>4</sup> However, children are not the sole beneficiaries of child participation. Whether adults have training or not in child participation and safeguarding, they have an opportunity to see their skills flourish and may experience improvements in their well-being when interacting with children.

### **5) Enhance accountability and democracy**

Participation increases opportunities for children to promote accountability and good governance. When they have access to policymakers they can assert, claim, and exercise their rights and strengthen government accountability. Child participation and the potential election process for child and youth councils and other representative bodies offer opportunities for children to enhance their understanding of and commitment to democratic processes, accountability, and transparency. They provide a hands-on view of how power relations unfold, and decision-making takes place. Moreover, when well executed, child participation at the school, community and municipality levels is especially important because it allows all children from different walks of life to reflect on and influence decisions affecting them.



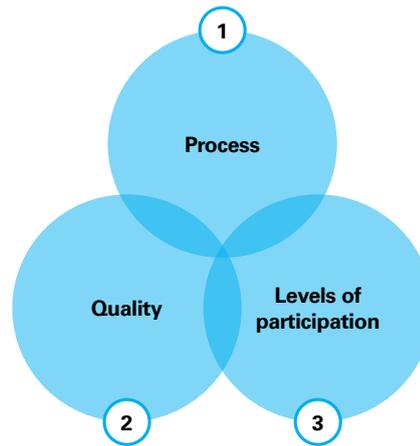
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### 3. Understanding effective, representative, and inclusive child participation

Participation can be an elusive concept. It has different meanings in different languages, and in some, there is no direct translation or definition. Therefore, we use a common understanding of the term throughout this document. Participation is a process that recognizes the right of children to engage seriously in matters that affect them and to be able to influence what happens. The process must also allow for children from every different community to be represented and heard and ensure that the spaces created for participation are adapted to be inclusive for the needs and capacities of different diverse groups of children. Child participation is commonly conceptualized as “children, individually and/or collectively, forming and expressing their views and influencing matters that concern them directly and indirectly.”<sup>6</sup>

Children must be able to give their views on issues that affect them and have genuine engagement in this process. One of the ways to facilitate and strengthen such processes at the local level is to create formal participation mechanisms in child and youth councils within children’s schools, cities, and communities. In order to achieve this end, the following dimensions of participation are necessary: process, quality, and levels of participation.

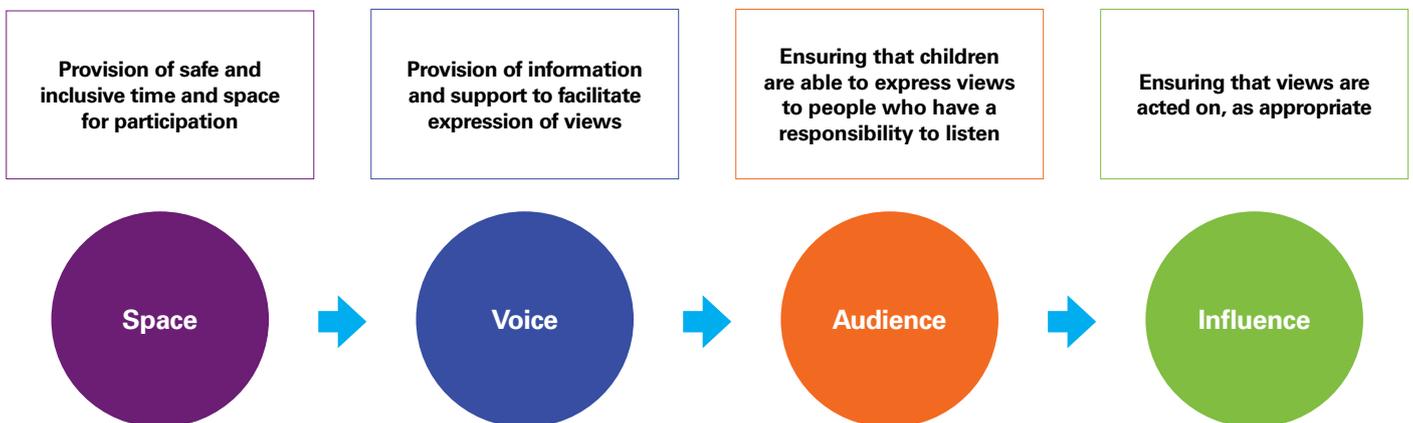
**Figure 1. Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation**



### 3.1 Process

Participation is a process —not a one-off activity. It is not enough just to listen to children. Once children express their views, these views must receive proper and serious consideration with feedback on outcomes and decisions that follow. Moreover, children must have access to the necessary information and support to facilitate the expression of their views through the medium of their choice. In addition, children must have access to those in a position to influence decisions affecting them. Effective participation, therefore, requires space, voice, audience, and influence.

**Figure 2. Effective participation process (courtesy of Laura Lundy)**



#### a. Space

Participation does not happen in a vacuum. At the local level, the democratic systems in place in most countries only extend to adults, although in some municipalities, children can vote at 16 years. Therefore, local governments must make efforts to create time and space (either online or offline) to enable children to meet and contribute to local policy. With the creation of this space and the children’s contributions, their concerns enter the local decision-making processes.

**Relevant questions to consider:**

- Where will children meet and how will they get there?
- Is the meeting place accessible, affordable, and safe for all children to reach?
- Is it possible to make transport available to help children attend meetings?
- Is the space comfortable and child-friendly with appropriate refreshments?
- Is there any arrangement with local schools for children to have time off to meet during the school day, if necessary?

*If we need training, we can request such training from the Municipality. Recent trainings we have participated in are urban planning, preparing grant application, ecology and climate issues, business etiquette and design thinking.*

*(Poznań, Poland)*

## **b. Voice**

To facilitate effective participation, local governments must provide children in child and youth councils with the appropriate information in child-friendly and accessible formats. In addition, children need information on what participation means, how they can engage with decision-making processes, the scope of potential involvement, and current and proposed policies, budgets, and other issues to which they can contribute.

**Relevant questions to consider:**

- Are municipal or city council papers produced in child-friendly formats? If children are invited to participate in any council processes, are the meetings accessible and safe for children to feel confident to understand what is happening and how to engage?
- Are municipal or local government officials providing children with child-friendly information about council policies, new proposals under discussion, budgets, and other information under review?
- Is there adequate adult support for the members of the child and youth council?
- Are child and youth council members provided with the training and capacity building they need - and request - to enable them to fulfill their role as members?

### c. Audience

There is little purpose in members of a child and youth council expressing their views or soliciting the views of other children if no one is available to listen to what they have to say. Participation demands that there is a commitment from the local government to be available on a regular basis to hear children's views, arguments, concerns, and feedback on local issues.

#### Relevant questions to consider:

- Does the child and youth council have formal and regular meetings with council officials? With elected members of the council? With the Mayor?
- If yes, is there documentation of these meetings and proper maintenance of these records?
- Do officials support and work to make children members feel comfortable and confident in meetings?
- Is the child and youth council able to invite members of the council to attend its meetings as necessary?

### d. Influence

Ultimately, if a child and youth council presents issues of importance to them to local government officials, the decision-makers need to commit to giving these issues serious consideration. Obviously, it will not be possible to respond always positively to requests from children. There can be, for example, competing demands, limited budgets, or legislative restrictions. Nevertheless, decision-makers should commit to listen to children, give proper thought and consideration to what they hear from children, and give feedback on what they hear and on any possible decisions they might make as a result of what they hear.

#### Relevant questions to consider:

- What happens to proposals or recommendations the child and youth council raises?
- Does the local council or government officials report back in a timely manner on how it may act in response to any concerns or issues the child and youth council raise?
- Does the local council or government officials provide to the child and youth council appropriate explanations as to the decisions made and the reasons behind them?
- Does the local council or government officials give information to the child and youth council about how the children's views were considered?
- Is there a right of appeal if the child and youth council feels that their views have been afforded inadequate consideration?

## 3.2 Quality

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has defined nine basic requirements for quality child participation.<sup>7</sup> These principles also underpin UNICEF's approach to meaningful, effective, and ethical child participation at the local level.

Child participation should be:

### a. Transparent and informative

Children must receive complete, accessible, diversity-sensitive, and age-appropriate information about their right to express their views freely. Moreover, decision-makers must give due weight to children's views and provide information on how children's participation will take place, its scope, purpose, and potential impact. In addition, decision-makers must inform children about the processes in which they participate, the decisions or issues they may influence, and how their views will affect decisions and decision-making. For example, if children are contributing their views to a municipal consultation on traffic, safety, and environmental pollution, adults must provide complete information on the topics. In this case, officials need to provide information about what is up for discussion, what the council is willing or able to change and what status the children's views will have. Without this information, the consultative process can become little more than a gesture.

One suggestion from young people on a youth council was that government officials should provide a dictionary of standard governance terms in straightforward language so that the young people can understand meeting discussions. Too often the young people felt confused and lost in council meetings.

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**Meeting this requirement means:**

- There is clarity of purpose about children’s participation and honesty about its parameters.
- Children understand how much impact they can have on decision-making and who will make the final decision.
- There is an explicit agreement with clear outline and an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all participants (children, adults, and other stakeholders).
- Children and adults identify and agree upon clear goals and targets.
- Decision-makers provide children with relevant and child-friendly information regarding their involvement and the issues they discuss.
- Local councils are accountable to children for the commitments they make.

**b. Voluntary**

Children participate voluntarily. Decision-makers or groups with whom children collaborate should never force by coercion or requirement any young people to express their views on any given issue. Participation is a right, not an obligation. No organization should force children to participate in representative participation mechanisms. If a school, community, or city-level organization establishes a child participation mechanism, that organization must inform children of the voluntary nature of their participation.

**Meeting this requirement means:**

- Children have time to consider their involvement, and processes are in place to ensure that they are able to give their personal, informed consent to their participation.
- Children have sufficient information and support to make an informed decision on their participation.
- Children know they can choose to discontinue their involvement at any stage.
- Children may withdraw from a participatory initiative or mechanism without sanctions or punishment and should never experience sanctions or penalties for ending their voluntary participation.

**c. Respectful**

Adults must treat children’s views with respect. Unless children believe that adults will really listen to and value their contributions, they will not feel confident in expressing them. Moreover, adults working with children should be aware of the different cultures and backgrounds of each individual and their views regarding their voice or image appearing in public. Adults also need an understanding of the socio-economic, environmental, and cultural context of the children’s lives.

**Meeting this requirement means:**

- Children can freely express their views and opinions, and those are treated with respect.

- Where the process of involvement requires representation from a wider group of children, the selection of representatives will be based on the principles of democracy and non-discrimination.
- Ways of working build the self-esteem and self-confidence of children of different ages and abilities so that all children feel able to contribute and comfortable to share their views.

#### **d. Relevant**

The issues addressed by the child participation mechanism are more likely to be relevant to children if they reflect concrete concerns that children experience in their day-to-day lives in their local communities. Therefore, children should be free to raise issues that they themselves identify as important and be free to determine for themselves whether they choose to engage with issues adults raise. Their participation should build on their personal knowledge – the information and insights that children have about their own lives, their communities and the issues that affect them.

##### **Meeting this requirement means:**

- The issues are relevant to the participating children and draw upon their knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Children help set the criteria for selection and representation for participation.
- Children are involved in ways and at levels in a pace appropriate to their capacities and interests.
- Ways of working and methods of children’s involvement incorporate and build on supportive local structures, knowledge, and practice and take into consideration the social, economic, and cultural context.
- Preparation involves support from adults in the children’s lives (e.g., parents/guardians, teachers) to ensure wider support for the participation of children.

#### **e. Child-friendly**

A child-friendly environment is crucial to meaningful child participation. It requires a space where adults adapt discussions and projects to the capacities and needs of children. Additionally, adults provide appropriate levels of support, so children feel able to contribute to their community. Child-friendliness includes recognizing that different children will have different support needs. Moreover, in accordance with their evolving capacities and their ages and backgrounds, they may need to participate through various of alternative approaches.

##### **Meeting this requirement means:**

- Ways of working build the self-esteem and self-confidence of children of different ages and abilities so that all children feel able to contribute and comfortable to share their views.
- Adults design methods of involvement in partnership with children to use mediums of expression they prefer.
- Adults make available sufficient time and resources and support children so that they have proper preparation for quality participation.

- Adults (including children's own parents/ guardians) understand the value of children's participation and play a positive role in supporting it through awareness-raising, reflection, and capacity-building.
- Meeting places are child-friendly and make children feel relaxed and comfortable. They have access to necessary facilities and are accessible to children with disabilities.
- Adults design organizational or official procedures to facilitate, rather than intimidate, children, and welcome less experienced children.
- Adults provide build the skills and capacity of children to enable them, individually and collectively, to participate effectively.
- Adults ask children, including children with visual or hearing impairments, what information they need and share information with children in good time in child-friendly formats and in languages that the children understand.
- Adults provide access to written information and professional interpretation that allows for children's full participation in discussions.
- Adults use non-technical language in all discussions involving children and explain clearly all jargon or technical terms.

## **f. Inclusive**

Inclusivity means acknowledging that children constitute a diverse group and positively considering differences without discrimination on any grounds. It is essential to ensure that the participatory environment is gender and culture sensitive and takes proactive measures to include children from different communities and backgrounds and children of different ages and different abilities. Creating inclusive participation will need a commitment to extensive and broad communication to groups of children who may be harder to reach, and to ensuring that within the participation mechanism, all children receive support to take part on an equal basis. Participation must avoid existing patterns of discrimination and encourage opportunities for involvement of marginalized children. Children are not a homogeneous group and participation needs to provide for equality of opportunity for all.

### **Meeting this requirement means:**

- All children have an equal chance to participate, and organizers develop systems to ensure that children do not experience discrimination against them because of age, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
- Children's involvement, if possible, includes all rather than a few; this could mean putting in place broad inclusive measures to communicate with children in their local settings as well as inviting representatives to a central point.
- Participatory practice with children is flexible enough to respond to the needs, expectations, and situations of different groups of children.
- Organizers take into account the age range, gender, and abilities of children in the way they organize, plan and present information on participation.
- Those working with children are able to facilitate an environment that is non-discriminatory and inclusive.

- Those working with children make no assumptions about what specific groups of children can or cannot do.
- Those working with children give equal opportunity to children to voice their opinions and reflect these contributions in any outcomes of a participatory process, including in processes that involve both children and adults.
- If there is a limit to how many children can participate in a given initiative or process, children themselves use the principles of democracy and inclusion to select from among their peers those who will represent them in participatory initiatives.

### **g. Supported by training**

Adults need preparation, skills, and support to facilitate children’s participation, to provide them, for example, with skills in listening, working jointly with children and engaging children in accordance with their evolving capacities and safeguarding children’s rights. Ensuring that adults working with children receive appropriate support and are accountable for their actions by evaluating their practices is also essential to the long-term insurance of safe and enabling environments for children. Children themselves may act as trainers and facilitators on how to promote effective participation. Additionally, children require capacity-building to strengthen their skills in, for example, effective awareness of their rights and training in organizing meetings, raising funds, dealing with the media, public speaking, and advocacy.

#### **Meeting this requirement means:**

- All staff and managers understand the importance of children’s participation and understand the commitment to it.
- Staff have appropriate training, tools, and other development opportunities in participatory practice to enable them to work effectively and confidently with children of different ages and abilities.
- Staff have appropriate support and supervision and receive an evaluation to assess their participation practices.
- There is an increase in specific technical skills and expertise — e.g., in communication, facilitation, conflict resolution or multicultural experience — through a combination of recruitment, selection, staff development and practice exchange.
- Relations between staff and between staff and management model appropriate behaviour, and staff and management treat each other with respect and honesty.
- Managers and staff for whom children’s participation entails a significant personal or cultural change receive support without this being regarded as a problem.
- Staff are able to express any views or anxieties about or involving children with the expectation that they will receive a constructive response.
- Children participating in child and youth councils may request areas in which they would like training, and these requests will receive a timely response.
- Former members of the child and youth councils may receive consideration to contribute to training.

## h. Safe and sensitive to risk

Adults have a responsibility towards the children with whom they work and must take every precaution to minimize the risk of harm to children. These risks of harm include physical or psychological violence, neglect, exploitation, or any other negative consequence of their participation. In certain situations, the expression of views by children may involve risks – from those in authority, from peers, or from family. Action necessary to provide appropriate protection will include the development of a clear child safeguarding strategy which recognizes the particular risks some groups of children face and the extra barriers they face in obtaining help. Children must be aware of their right to protection from harm and know where to go for help if they should need it. Investment in working with families and communities is important to build understanding of the value and implications of participation and to minimize children's exposure to risks of harm.

However, the adults who lead these activities are responsible to ensure that children participate in a safe environment. This responsibility remains with the adults at all times.

### **Meeting this requirement means that:**

- Adults must plan and organize so that the protection rights of children remain paramount.
- Children involved in participation activities are aware of their right to be safe from abuse and know where to go for help if need arises.
- Adults assign appropriate staff and volunteers with skill and knowledgeable to address and coordinate child safeguarding issues during participatory processes.
- Staff and volunteers organizing the participatory process must create a child safeguarding strategy that is specific to each process. Staff, volunteers, and children must receive communication about the plan and must all understand the safeguarding strategy. The communication must be in an accessible, age appropriate and child-friendly language.
- Systems must be put in place to identify risks and make plans to mitigate risks with clear lines of responsibility and accountability.
- Safeguards are in place throughout the time of the entire activity to minimize risks and prevent abuse. For example, children should receive proper supervision and protection at all times. Risk assessments should be in place for any and all residential activities involving children. Additionally, in planning, safeguards should consider and address risks that a child may harm another child.
- Staff and volunteers agree to abide by a clear standard of conduct and behaviour in the form of a code of conduct or similar document so that they know what behaviour is and is not appropriate. This information should include specific information about supervising children appropriately in a transparent and accountable way. A system for reporting all incidents is in place, and all staff and volunteers understand the conduct and behaviour requirements.
- Child safeguarding procedures recognize the particular risks some groups of children face and the extra barriers they face in obtaining help. Mitigating measures should include steps to reduce these barriers so that these groups of children can participate safely.
- Staff and volunteers must make careful assessment of the risks associated with children's participation in speaking out, campaigning or advocacy. Depending on the risks staff and volunteers identify, they may adapt steps and guidelines to protect children's identity or to provide follow-up measures to give protection.

- Staff and volunteers obtain consent for the use of all information children provide. In addition, adults must safeguard all information about children and must treat information that identifies children as confidential and must safeguard this information at all times. Any personal identifiable information — e.g., names, addresses, contact or medical information — should only be collected for the specific purposes when necessary. Staff and volunteers must store securely this information and delete as soon as it is no longer needed. Staff and volunteers should consider the amount of information children share and if this information can identify them, even when their name and image are withheld. Unless children and adults agree otherwise, it must not be possible to trace information back to individual/groups of children.
- Staff or supervisors must create a formal complaints procedure to allow children involved in participatory activities to make a complaint in confidence about any issue concerning their involvement. The complaint procedure must be accessible to children in relevant languages and formats. Those working with children must consider the support children need if and when they make a complaint or disclosure or when they may be the subject of such complaint or disclosure.
- Children must give explicit consent for anyone to make or publish photographs, videos, or digital images of them.
- Staff or supervisors must delegate and plan effectively for responsibilities relating to liability, safety, travel, and medical insurance.

**Example:**  
**Raising awareness of  
safeguarding policies**

The Municipality of Akureyri (Iceland) has an action plan on safeguarding on the municipality’s webpage. Child protective services and the Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) focal point developed the procedure. The plan extends the child safeguarding policy and provides for the associated responsibilities and the obligations the staff report to child protection services in the event of any concerns. All school principals, administrators and teachers have received education on the policy and children between the ages of 9 —16 years receives complete information on the plan through the schools.

In Fuenlabrada (Spain), the Childhood Plan includes regulations on protection. When children register to participation activities, there is a registration form on the website that families and children must sign, including, for example, informed consent and image rights. To complete registration for participation, they must receive information on the processes for and guiding participation and sign the consent forms confirming that they have received this information. There are also data protection forms that must be signed.

## i. Accountable

A commitment to follow-up and to evaluate child participation is essential. For example, if a child and youth council participates in some research or a consultation on a given issue to give decision-makers additional information, the decision-makers must provide the children with feedback. In this case, those using the views of the children must provide information on the interpretation and use of the information they received. Moreover, where necessary, the adults must give the children the opportunity to challenge and influence the analysis of the findings. Any group using children's views or participation must give explicit feedback on how the children and young people's participation has affected or may affect any outcomes. Wherever appropriate, children should have the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities. Where possible, children should monitor and evaluate their participation.

### **Meeting this requirement means:**

- Children participate from the earliest possible stage of any initiative and are able to influence the design and content of any consultative processes.
- Children receive support to participate in follow-up and evaluation processes.
- As an integral part of any participation initiative, adults address the follow-up and evaluation processes during the planning stages.
- Adults support and encourage children to share information on their work and working projects and their participatory experiences with peer groups, local communities, and organizations.
- Adults provide rapid and straightforward feedback on the impact of the children's involvement, the outcome of any decisions or next steps and the value of their involvement.
- Adults provide feedback to all children involved.
- Adults ask children about their satisfaction with the participation process and for their views on ways in which to improve the process.
- Adults communicate with the children who participate and provide the results of monitoring and evaluation in an accessible and child-friendly way; additionally, they take into account the children's feedback for future participation work.
- Adults acknowledge mistakes they identify and make plans based on lessons learned; they plan how they will use lessons learned to improve participatory processes in the future.
- Adults evaluate how they will translate and implement children's priorities and recommendations into their policies, strategies, and programmes.

### 3.3 Levels of participation

Children and young people can engage in a participatory process at different levels, depending on the context, the issues, and the support and resources available: consultative, collaborative and child-led. **All levels can be appropriate for different purposes** but must always comply with the need for space, voice, audience, and influence and follow the nine basic requirements outlined above. When exploring opportunities for involving children, it is helpful to assess what level of participation it might involve, whether this is the most appropriate level and whether it is possible to engage children more significantly. It is also worth noting that initiatives that begin as consultative can develop into collaborative or child-led activities in the long-term. Moreover, a child and youth council can function at all three levels depending on the participation activity.

The different levels of participation can be described as follows:

**Consultative participation** occurs when adults seek children's and young people's views to build knowledge and understanding of their lives and experiences or to design a programme. It involves an approach that is adult-initiated and led and managed by adults. However, it recognizes that children and young people have a valuable perspective to contribute to the development of policies, services, or local facilities.

#### Examples:

Undertaking an online survey or running focus groups with children to explore their ideas for improving their access to local services, e.g., public information, issues of confidentiality, available and affordable transport, and affordable entry fees.

Getting the views of a child with a disability, directly, to ensure that decision-makers hear the needs of the child in relation to specialist support services.

**Collaborative participation** involves a partnership between adults, children, and young people. Collaborative participation is usually adult-initiated but involves working with children as partners and empowers them to influence an initiative. It allows for increasing levels of self-directed action by children and young people over a period of time.

#### Examples:

Engaging children and young people as partners in developing a programme for increased access to sports activities for girls across the community.

Involving children and young people in developing a policy to reduce environmental pollution.

**Child-led participation** is where adults provide children and young people with the space and opportunity to initiate their own activities and carry out advocacy. Instead of responding to ideas or projects suggested by adults, the children and young people have the support to make their own choices or establish their own structures or organizations for determining the issues that are most important to them and which issues they wish to address. For example, a child and youth council can be child-led where the children are solely responsible for the organization, management and agenda within the council and the adults contribute with support and facilitation. It allows children and young people to meet and organize their own activities and identify the issues that concern them. It involves adults serving as facilitators rather than leaders although it is important to recognize that, increasingly, children and young people can and do participate actively online without adult involvement. However, even when children are leading activities themselves, adults should be ready to support with risk assessment and available to respond to any child safeguarding issues should they arise. For example, adults should help children with data protection when children have the need to collect or handle children's data.

**Examples:**

Children initiating a campaign to reduce road traffic and air pollution in the streets around their school.

Children going on strike to protest the failure of the local council to take sufficient steps to address local environmental issues.



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## 4. Enabling features of a child participatory environment

### 4.1 Legislation and policy

Legislation is key to establishing recognition of and entitlement to children's access to safe, equitable, and meaningful participation in local decision-making. Many governments, for example, have introduced legislation requiring that every municipality establish a child and youth council, or every school establish a school council. Governments can introduce broader legislation requiring governments at national and local level to consult with children when new policies that concern them come forward for discussion.

In general, local governments have limited legislative powers and must operate within the framework set at national level. However, local governments have the scope to apply national provisions in constructive and positive ways and to pass additional policies at the local level. Embedding participation as an integral and essential dimension of the CFCI provides a positive framework from which to build.

## Examples:

In Guyancourt (France), Decree no. 2016-1631 of November 29, 2016 institutes a child participation council in all colleges. It defines general principles governing its composition and sets its areas of competence and grants a great deal of autonomy to the college's board of directors to establish it through deliberation. The college's board of directors is responsible for the composition, the procedures for electing or appointing members, and the procedures for operating the council. Therefore, it is essential that the creation of the council be the subject of prior joint reflection by the management, teaching, education, guidance, health, and social staff. This consultation process must also be extended to parents' representatives and, of course, to the students so that the entire educational community can support the system.

The creation of the National Council of Children and Adolescents of Catalonia (CNIAC) (Spain) is part of articles 27 and 34 of Law 14/2010, of 27 May, on the rights and opportunities of children and adolescents in Catalonia. The law recognizes children's right to participate by promoting the creation of territorial participation structures at the local and regional levels. It is one of the first regional regulations on child participation.

*The Director of youth services often refers to the imperative of the legislative framework. This is also seen as a way to silence any discussion around participation ('we have the law, and that's enough'). The legislative framework was broadly considered when the city was developing its overall strategy on citizen participation.*

*(Adult supporter, Finland)*

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**Actions to ensure an appropriate legislative and policy foundation for the work can include the following:**

**a) Create the necessary policy environment**

- Undertake an analysis of where and how the relevant international and national provisions need adoption at the local level.
- Adopt a municipal-wide resolution on child participation and the nature of commitment to its implementation.
- Ensure to include explicitly that participation is a core principle in the overall local strategy with requirement that each department elaborate on how this will be operationalized in their work —e.g., urban planning, education.
- Establish a commitment to the creation of a child and youth council and school councils in every school, including primary and secondary, as well as any vocational, policy and special or residential schools.

**b) Support implementation and capacity**

- Encourage each department to establish a child participation team and strategy and build on the overall municipal strategy.
- Provide training for all relevant local authority officials on the international and national legislative and policy standards in respect of child participation.
- Involve children as partners in designing the participation policy and strategy
- Include the centrality of children's involvement in all key local authority communications – for example, policy documents, press releases, reports.
- Introduce a requirement that all programmes and decisions that affect children —e.g., housing developments, playgrounds, must involve children as participants.
- Introduce a system for allocation of child participation budgets for child and youth councils that they have responsibility for allocating.

**Examples:  
The need to embed  
participation at  
the policy and  
strategic level in  
municipalities**

The city of Oulu (Finland) includes participation in several strategic documents. For example, the city's participation strategy, the open governance strategy, the city's education strategy (and as part of the education plan), the city's youth work strategy, and the early education plan. Furthermore, the city's youth and education services jointly developed an 'operating model for participation' for the city that describes the different forms of participation that the city council has endorsed. And, finally, participation is present in the city's CFCI action plan, where there are several targets and supporting indicators on participation. Children and young people participate in the hearings and events organized by the service units located in the city's four districts. For example, students have been participating in the development of the local education plan, including defining what should be the values underpinning education in Oulu. In addition, the department of urban planning has organized consultations with children on making decisions about zoning.

In Stuttgart (Germany), the adult facilitators state:

*We have a participation concept, which is reviewed every two years, in which the municipal council [...] decides anew that there should again be a youth council election. And in this municipal council resolution, the alternatives [...] to these youth council elections are always presented. [...] what if there are no elections, for example, because not enough candidates come forward? Then there are still open or project-oriented forms of participation that we can carry out. It's a participation concept that has already been carried out for years, on a city-wide level.*

The city of Regensburg (Germany) city council has adopted a 'concept' of child participation. This concept includes all forms of participation taking place in the city and includes district-level citizen forums, where children come together and participate in project-related participation. Anchoring child participation in the participation focal point's job description and the overall city strategy gives children the right to participate. One participant explains that the strategy:

*gives me the right to approach the other offices and say that in this and that area you must please take participation into account.*

It is also anchored in the city's CFCI action plan, which is approved by the city council, and in multiple other strategies. One official explains:

*We have anchored it everywhere. We have anchored it through the quality goals of the [...] overall city strategy for all urban planning and urban development. We have anchored it in the overall concept of family-friendliness. We have anchored it in the strategies for child-friendly urban development. And we are in the process of anchoring it in the new urban development plan for 2040.*

Concretely, for example, playgrounds in the city cannot be developed without child and youth participation, which is part of the city's council-approved quality standards. Developers are required to consult children and bear reasonable additional costs related to this consultation.

The municipality of Cascais (Portugal) is currently working on a strategy on child participation as a result of the local situation analysis, which demonstrates that there were several attempts in the city to promote child participation but no unifying framework, methodologies, vision or follow-up on results. The aim of the strategy is to 1) draw a vision for what child participation means in the city, 2) create a network of partners (the city is also working on a mapping of different participatory practices in the city), and 3) build the capacity of different local actors on participation. There is also a youth participatory budget (YPB) process active in all schools of the city, where € 10,000 Euros budget is allocated for each school for student's proposals. One class in each school is leading the process (YPB class). The role of the YPB class is to support children's participation in the participatory budgeting process. Young

people have an active role throughout the process —from reviewing norms according to their experience and encouraging children to participate to collecting children’s proposals —not only to improve their school but also to improve the community. These proposals will be integrated in the adult’s participatory budget. The young people organize the meetings and count votes. Additionally, this activity is tied usually to citizenship education classes.

The municipality of Guimarães (Portugal) has an overall plan for youth that includes a strong component of child participation:

*All the sectors of the municipal domain are involved; however, it is a space for active participation and the construction of public policies, in collaboration with the municipality’s young people. All the policies that are listed, all the objectives and the strategic areas of the Action Plan, are projects and programmes that these young people from the territory identified.*

The Social Development Plan for the municipality reflects the incorporation of participation. The Municipal Youth Plan is central to reinforcing child participation, and within the plan, the Municipal Youth Office is an intermediary between the young people, youth associations and the formal structures of the local government. Each of the different participatory structures of the city, including participatory budgeting, the ‘Eco Parliament’ project, or the youth council, has its own regulations.

## 4.2 Awareness and knowledge about the right to participate

The development of skills and competencies for children and adults should be at the centre of child participation mechanisms, which seek to create an enabling environment for children to express their views and take part in decision-making. Such capacities are an essential dimension in paving the way to a child-friendly society. One of the major and persistent barriers to meaningful child participation has been the lack of confidence and competence among many adults in working with children in a collaborative manner.

**Young people have some clear do’s and don’t’s when it comes to training.**

### **DO**

- Ensure that children are asked what training they are interested in
- Think about fun ways to deliver training, e.g., a training on public speaking delivered by a local actor
- Invite previous members of school and youth councils to provide training
- Provide opportunities to have refresher training and on-going support

### **DON’T**

- Deliver long lectures by adults in formal settings
- Provide too much information at the beginning before children have got settled into their role
- Assume that all children can be catered for through a ‘one size fits all’ approach – allow for diversity and flexibility

## Children

Children can only participate if they know both about their right to be heard and about how it is possible to make their voices heard. Children and adults in cities and communities have identified a range of approaches to promote interest and awareness in the opportunities for children to become active members of child and youth councils or other mechanisms for sharing their views:

### **Strengthen knowledge about children's rights**

- Invest in teaching young people about politics and civic engagement in school through workshops.
- Provide an information board about child rights with pictures that children have painted placed at all playgrounds of the city.
- Run an annual Youth Conference for all schools in the community to raise awareness about children's rights and how children can play a part.
- Involve former members of child and youth councils to become mentors and supporters to strengthen capacity and share expertise.

### **Build awareness about opportunities for participation**

- Send letter from the city council to all children and young people of the given age for membership of the child and youth council.
- Hold a campaign tour each year around schools in the community where current school and child and youth council members hold information sessions for students.
- Support previous school and child and youth council members to provide short 5-minute information sessions.
- Share information through the city's website—all meetings and minutes of meetings of the council are shared—through parents and social media networking and newspapers.
- Provide direct contact with politicians, and campaigns that would present politics in a way that sounds exciting to children and young people.
- Publicize the work of the child and youth councils through an Instagram account to disseminate information and awareness.
- Support young people themselves in the child and youth council, go to schools once a year to promote the work – it is more relatable when another young person describes and promotes the work to other young people.

**Examples:**  
**Awareness-raising  
through multiple  
media and forums**

An adult supporter of the youth council in Akuryeri (Iceland) observed:  
*More education, more education, more education. That is the most important thing. Everybody, both adults and children need to know children's rights and understand them. That means being able to relate children's rights to their work and the daily lives of children. Further and better education on children's rights for more people would definitely strengthen child participation mechanisms. Children need to know their rights and when they know them, they are more likely to form their own opinions and they become more interested in taking part and making an impact.*

The young people in the youth council in Kufstein (Austria) go to schools once a year to promote the work. As one adult facilitator explained:  
*It is better to hear it from the youth themselves than when an 'old teenager like me' goes into the classes. It is simply more relatable for the young people than if an old man tells them something about youth participation. When the young people go into the schools and classes, they attract attention.*

The council has its own Instagram page, and the city's channel and youth centers regularly promote the work. The young people interviewed had joined the youth council either after hearing about it at school or after having participated in other participatory activities such as an annual Youth Conference where all schools participate. The youth coordinator is also regularly 'on the road' with young people in schools to share information about the youth council.

In Jyväskylä (Finland), promotion of the youth council is mostly through schools and also through social media campaigning and posters. The youth council itself plays a big role in this promotion. For example, members of the youth council go to schools to spread the word and also come up with guerilla marketing tactics such as writing on the pavements with chalk. The young people lead the marketing themselves as in "everything" as adults point out.

The children in Carbajosa de la Sagrada (Spain) do not receive training in the context of the council but consider learning by doing as experience is important to their learning and personal development. Participation is part of the school's curriculum proposal, and there is a progressive learning curriculum design. The council regularly exchanges with similar groups in other regions of Spain and internationally.

## Adults

It is equally important that adults are aware of children's participation rights. They are the gatekeepers in a position to promote or inhibit opportunities for participation whether as parents, teachers, social workers, council workers or local politicians. Children themselves can play a major role in promoting awareness. Strategies to build understanding and awareness across key adults within the municipality and the local community can include:

### **Strengthen knowledge about children's rights**

- Organize workshops on children's rights for different sections of the community – parents, professionals, and politicians.
- Design and disseminate information leaflets on children's rights and children's participation rights.
- If possible, include child rights education in the local schools' curricula.
- Work with local teacher training institutions to develop child rights courses and provide them with accreditation.
- Provide training for all departments in the local government and embed this as a central dimension of committing to child-friendliness.

### **Build awareness about participation**

- Work with the child and youth councils to develop regular communication on what they are doing, why and what they have achieved.
- Encourage schools to use any online platforms they have to communicate with parents about the work of the school council and their value.
- Provide opportunities for children to share the work they are doing through local media or the local government's platforms.
- Engage parents as partners in the process of building a participatory environment for children.
- Disseminate information about the work of the school and child and youth councils to other agencies—e.g., health and police—and encourage them to meet with the young people to explain their work.

**Example:  
The value of  
engaging families**

The Avilés (Spain) local council found that families play an important role in valuing and promoting children's participation – particularly in the context of multiple extracurricular activities and school pressure. Meetings were held with families to present the work that had been organized and carried out by children and adolescents. The families were pleasantly surprised to the point of realizing that they were entirely unaware both of what their children were engaged in and the capacities they demonstrated in their citizenship activities. In addition, when the city started to make childhood plans with children, there were technicians who were reluctant because they did not see children as capable. However, the municipal and regional childhood plans were analyzed by the Centre for Sociological Studies on Childhood, and the Centre concluded:

*[In] terms of clarity, viability, sustainability, clear and precise indicators, and measurable objectives (...) the Avilés childhood plan was above them in the ranking.*

In this way, the technicians acknowledged that children were able to demonstrate a very broad and sensible vision.

### 4.3 Attitudes towards children

There is still considerable resistance among many adults towards recognizing that children have both a right to be heard and that their views can add significant value. Investment in challenging these attitudes is central to the creation of respectful environments where children grow up confident that they will be listened to and taken seriously in all spheres of their lives. Moreover, it is also important to recognize that younger children also have the right to be heard although the approaches adopted to elicit their views need to be developed age appropriately.

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### **Children from many countries consistently highlight the lack of respect they receive from adults:**

- When discussing areas of decision-making where young people are heard, one member recalls that one adult representative in the health department board had once said that all young people are “drunkards and only interested in partying.”
- It is common for adults to have the attitude to not take children seriously. Even though children and young people are in a child and youth council with opportunities to speak, it is unclear whether they are actually taken seriously.
- Despite positive feedback on interventions in the city council, their engagement does not really have an impact on decision-making or what happens in the city council.
- Young people are only there as a formality, and adults take seriously the views of young people only if young people agree with the adult views.
- Adults want children and young people to be part of decision-making but only when it concerns certain types of young people. For example, when the discussions concern young people involved in certain communities, adults suddenly get difficult, and their prejudices against certain types of young people, who are seen as drunkards, come to the fore.
- When children argue that they should get some financial support for their work on the council, as adults do, the adults completely disregarded their views.

### **These perspectives are reinforced by adults:**

- Participation is often tokenistic and does not go deep enough. For example, participatory budgeting easily becomes an activity of ticking the box.
- Child participation work is poorly resourced so not many people are interested in working on it and it can appear to have low status and be a niche issue.
- Political opposition as well as opposition and potential manipulation by teachers or the broader school community are common barriers at the beginning of projects to develop participatory mechanisms.

**Actions to break down these attitudes include the following:**

- Encourage adults to engage directly with children's participation. It is often only when they see what children are doing and are capable of that their attitudes begin to shift.
- Encourage a commitment to ensuring that participation is embedded and engrained in youth work and all associated training.
- Introduce work on participation and the child and youth councils as a cross-cutting issue impacting on and relevant for the council as a whole — every aspect of the council's work.
- Publicise the role and the successes of the child and youth councils in order to make them more familiar to the wider public and help them understand the positive contribution children can make to their local communities.
- Build positive relationships with local media to encourage them to cover stories about the participatory activities of children.
- Invite parents to public or school meetings where children and supporting adults can share the work they are doing, the reasoning for the work they are doing, and to encourage questions and debate.

**Examples:  
Overcoming the  
attitudinal hurdles  
to children's  
participation**

In Regensburg (Germany), ensuring that there is political support to and interest in the council requires continuous effort. In addition, ensuring that all employees with the local government are aware of the council and the implications of participation to their own work is also important. However, having been established for several years, now, adults recognize that the council has a good reputation in the city. Establishing the council was not easy:

*It was originally a challenge to convince the specialists in the administration that something like this is important and should be done. And also to convince politicians that something like this should be set up at all. And I think many other municipalities still have this challenge for the time being.*

And:

*As a rule, if there is no understanding, no awareness, no sensitivity that young people are part of the urban society, then it becomes difficult. So there has to be a self-image that it is simply a cross-sectional task. Just as shaping migration is a cross-cutting task, youth participation must also be a cross-cutting task.*

In Eltville (Germany), in establishing the youth council:

*the biggest challenge was certainly to gain acceptance, both in the administration and in politics. In other words, overcoming the scepticism that young people who are involved in this youth council are really profitable for everyone. Now, everyone or almost everyone has said, yes, it's worth it to us, and to involve the youth, that also brings us all something. That has certainly been achieved over years or decades, so to speak. And that's also something that can't be forced. Experience also plays a role here. And the experience of success, of course, in every respect. Whether they are successes for the young people. But also the other way around. Talks between young people and adults at all levels. And then, at some point, the conviction came.*

### **Example: Increasing adult awareness about participation**

Oulu (Finland) provides a positive example of a many-layered approach to children's participation at the municipal level where the aim is not only to offer children the opportunity to influence public policy but also to increase adult awareness about participation.

- The city organizes an annual Children's Townhall and an annual Youth Summit.
- Dedicated forums also take place with school councils where children from different participation groups come together to exchange their experiences or thoughts together with local government representatives, civil society organizations, teachers, and youth workers and learn about opportunities to participate.
- Views and proposals collected through the Townhall and Summit are taken to relevant decision-makers, and feedback is always provided at the following event.
- The youth council has a representative on three department boards and the city-level steering committee dedicated to equality and participation.
- The city has completed several child impact assessments in welfare services and culture and education services. The city always consults the children as part of these impact assessments.
- The city solicits children's views for example, as part of different building and infrastructure projects, especially when these relate to spaces that young people frequent. The CFCI coordination group is part of these processes to ensure children are heard and their best interest is considered.
- The youth council has two representatives in the CFCI steering committee and supports the work especially on the CFCI action plan target that was set by children and young people. They also receive feedback on CFCI-related matters at the youth council meetings. The youth council reviews the CFCI situation analysis and suggests different actions to include in the local action plan on areas such as youth services, welfare services and urban planning. Young people can participate in national CFCI coordination meetings. The city collects children's views as part of the CFCI situation analysis.



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## 5. Child participation in local decision-making processes (practice)

Child and youth councils represent the overwhelming formal child participation mechanisms at the level of the municipality and within schools. They can have different shapes and mandates and vary significantly in their membership – both in terms of number and recruitment. There is not one unique way to design and create a council. However, all child and youth councils share some – limited – common features:

- They are collective bodies that provide a space for discussion among their members.
- They are settings for children and young people with the expectation that these children and young people will represent their peers, regardless of how representative the council actually is and the way its members are selected.
- They enjoy formal recognition by authorities in a decision-making position – whether local authorities or school management.

These features are important to consider when establishing a new council or seeking to strengthen an existing council. They lead to a number of questions to consider, namely:

**What** should be the role of the council?

**Who** will participate in the council?

**How** will the council organize its work on a daily basis?

**Example:  
What motivates  
children to  
participate: Voices  
from children and  
young people**

*Hope and the possibility of acting positively to make their city evolve and contribute to a better life; the recognition of their capacity to be a force of proposal; the dialogue with the elected officials of the city.*

*To have a unique space of expression, to be able to act for their city and its inhabitants, to propose their projects and carry them out, to be taken into account.*

*The desire to change things they disagree with, to be able to express their ideas and BE HEARD, to participate in a positive evolution of society, to integrate a youth group that is not assimilated to the college*

*The sincerity of the proposal (we won't be able to do everything), to make their city move, to leave traces of a childhood desire, to meet friends from another part of the city, to be proud of their commitment, to see the achievements of their predecessors, to meet the Mayor and drink a lemonade with her!*

*Getting involved for their city because they have at one point been questioning a missing development or have had an idea that they found great and feasible for their fellow citizens.*

## 5.1 Child and youth councils

### What should be the role of the Council?

Many local authorities that are part of the CFCI or are seeking to become child-friendly cities or communities establish child and youth councils or seek to strengthen the work of existing councils. Councils constitute a visible form of formal participation that attests to the commitment of the authority to give attention to children and give them the opportunity to have their voices heard. Yet, it is essential to define adequately their role in terms of the expected contribution of the council. Doing so will help avoid focusing on the council as an isolated body and open a reflection on its level of influence and status in the decision-making process at the local level.

Adults and children involved in local child and youth councils have highlighted several dimensions of the Council's role, which can be categorized under the following main themes:

Provide a **space for the expression and representation** of children and young people's views in shaping the city, namely:

- Represent children and young people in the city in local decision-making, in particular by promoting their views and interests, and ensuring that their perspectives are systematically included.
- Advise the Mayor and City council on issues of relevance to children and young people.
- Improve the city for children and young people.

Act as a **contact point between the local government, children, and young people**, namely:

- Provide a two-way channel of communication between children and young people and the local governments and decision-makers, through which information can become accessible.
- Ensure that children and young people have an entry point within the local administration, when they want to do something or need something.
- Enable decision-makers to include other young people for consultations.

**Develop child participation more broadly** in the city, by building the interest, capacity, and commitment by both decision-makers and children and young people to strengthen the latter's engagement in local decision-making. Child and youth councils:

- Bring socio-cultural issues closer to children and young people.
- Enhance the democratic participation of children and young people beyond the council itself.
- Raise awareness of the importance of hearing children's contributions among decision-makers.
- Help create a sense of community by promoting cohesion and inclusion.

In this context, it is important to bear in mind that child participation in and through democratic processes operates differently from adults' participation. While adult members of the city council represent their constituency, children and young people's representative function is largely based on their personal views and experiences. Put differently, children and young people are not necessarily expected to speak and act on behalf of their peers but to contribute through their own experiences to enlightening decision-making as it affects children. However, because adults tend to expect child participation mechanisms to mirror their own decision-making bodies, the legitimacy of the views shared by members of the child and youth council vis-à-vis decision-makers also largely depends on their ability to represent the interests of children as a whole, and those of specific groups of children. This is neither a necessity nor an obligation but the reflection of frequent adults' expectations when setting up such bodies at the local level.

*A phrase I use way too much is that we make young people's voices heard, but that's what it is. We represent the voices of young people and bring in the perspectives of young people that are impacted. No one goes to the city's website every day to check whether there's new projects coming up on their not-so-popular hobby or similar. But that everyone has an equal place in our municipality and feel equally good.*

*(Youth council member, Lappeenranta, Finland)*



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*We try not only to bring together children and young people, but to reach out to the whole of society, from everyone's age and reality, and to work together. Everyone who has something to contribute is welcome! It is a place where you can express yourself freely.*

*(Member of the children's municipal council, Avilés, Spain)*

**Examples:  
Children's  
commitment  
to democratic  
engagement**

In Akureyri (Iceland), the children view the role of the council to be:

- a bridge between politicians and children within the municipality to try and create solidarity and togetherness between the two.
- the opportunity for children and young people to have a voice in projects that are usually planned and carried out by adults.
- ensure that the point of view of children can be seen in the municipality's implementations; and improve the democratic participation of children and young people.

The municipality also offers more informal forms of participation, such as surveys, a suggestion button on the municipality's website, a city council meeting for the young, and interview sessions with local decision-makers in schools.

In Cascais (Portugal), young people themselves explain that the aim of the process is "active participation and active citizenship." Adults similarly describe the process as aiming for "more participatory citizens in the future." It is a pedagogical process. For example, the adults realized that young people do not know how to vote, or where to put their cross [on the ballot]:

*Initially in the school council elections, they would vote as a group inside the ballot box, inside the booth, and they didn't know that it was an individual thing. It is normal, they have never voted. So, this pedagogical component is determinant. That is what defines it. But the goal is really to make more participative citizens in the future, more involved in the community.*

In Cascais, The Voice of Youth project is a group of young people who are represented by delegates and sub-delegates. Through this project, the young people have the opportunity to reflect on aspects that they consider a priority. From that process, the municipal schools present new plans that promote change for young people and their community. In addition, in the case of "The Voice of Youth", the participatory process plays an important role in bringing decision-making closer to young people. The young people emphasize that the participatory process demystifies the idea that politicians are far away and untouchable. It helps them understand the role of the executive, that the representatives were elected by the citizens, and that they listen to and respect their opinion. If children's suggestions are taken into account, it makes them feel valued and that they are participative and active citizens —not mere receivers but emitters as well of what they think is important to improve the Municipality of Cascais. az

In Schiltigheim (France), young people describe the role of the council as improving the city from a young person's point of view:

*It allows to create a more utopian world, because the children do not necessarily have the same vision of the city [...] Children will be able to give an opinion that will differ from that of adults.*

They see themselves laying a part in "bridging the gap between children and the town hall." And as a young eco-delegate to the school council sees the role of the youth council member as that of sharing and discussing new ideas on how to make and making the school better, helping develop rules to improve the school, representing the ideas of the class, and "removing waste or at least help the planet a little."

## Who will participate in the council?

The composition of the child and youth council is a defining feature of the participation mechanism. It will shape the very nature of the council. In deciding on its composition, including how members are selected, on which criteria, and whether non-members can take part in activities, it is critical to keep in mind the various ways in which the council contributes to decision-making. Choices related to its composition are likely to impact the respective weight of the different elements previously cited. Participation in the child and youth council's activities, therefore, raises several issues which boil down to one overarching question: who can participate in which aspects of the council's work? In answering this question, various dimensions need to be addressed:

### How many members should the council have?

There is no single answer to the question, as the size of the council will depend on various considerations. Options to consider include:

- A **council with a set number of members**, which meet as a small group of children representing their peers in the municipality. This is the most common model.
- A **council open to anyone** who wants to participate without limitation.

It can also be a mix of the two, with a council with formal members who can vote and make decisions and open to anyone who wants to participate in activities, initiatives, and discussions but without the possibility to vote the budget or formally bring up issues to the city council for example.

### Are there membership criteria and if so, what are they?

The definition of membership criteria will have a significant impact on the nature and work of the Council. Various options are possible:

- A very open membership – a recommended option – to ensure that any young person within the municipality/locality can have access to the membership function. Often, local authorities will set an age range for participation, typically around teenage years.
- When the recruitment involves the school system, membership criteria can be based on the school grade (e.g., fourth and fifth grade students). This can be limiting as it inevitably excludes children who are not in school and implies a narrow age range.
- Gender balance requirements may need to be considered, especially if it appears that one gender consistently represents an overwhelming majority of members.
- An open membership can be combined with certain membership positions reserved for specific groups, that are traditionally marginalised and may not have access to opportunities to have their views heard through formal mechanisms unless they have a dedicated space. These groups include children with disabilities, children from minorities or who are indigenous, migrant, refugees and asylum-seeking children, Roma children, among others (see [Section 7](#) below).

### How are members selected?

The way council members are selected is a critical and complex issue, as formal participation mechanisms tend to attract children and young people with certain personality features and skills (e.g., being outspoken, not shy, with a certain level of self-confidence, being able to express themselves well, being a good student, more affluent backgrounds). A fundamental

principle is that council members need to be selected by children themselves. A key question here is also whether children and young people participating in the council have a representative function beyond being a child participation mechanism. Various dimensions can be considered and combined:

- **Election.** In many municipalities, members are elected by their peers. The election can take place at the municipality level with candidates presenting a programme to all children and young people in the municipality. It can also involve various forms of electoral districts, either based on a geographic area or the school for instance. In municipalities with significant disparities across neighbourhoods, this can help ensure that children from various socio-economic backgrounds are represented. Election is the most common way to recruit members of child and youth councils, mirroring the appointment process for adults in the city council. It has in and of itself a representative dimension as children entrust some of their peers with the responsibility to represent children and young people's interests in local decision-making.
- **Other approaches for selecting members:**
  - **Volunteer basis.** Young people volunteer to be part of the council, but there is no actual election. They are endorsed as such for the position. Here, two approaches are possible. Either all volunteers are automatically selected as members, or volunteers apply explaining their motivations to be part of the council. In both cases, in practice, volunteers are selected often beforehand and encouraged to volunteer by their teachers, for example. The challenge is to ensure that children have a final say regarding who represents them.
  - **Recruitment among members of other councils.** The local government recruits members for the council from school councils or district councils or youth organizations. In this model, council members are selected among existing representatives – themselves usually elected or volunteers – in other bodies, through a vote or by consensus within these bodies.
  - **Appointment from existing organizations.** Namely, members are elected from youth organizations.
  - **Rotating positions.**
  - **No selection process at all. Everyone is welcome.**

### How to support the election process?

To promote an election process featuring candidates dedicated to improving local decision-making and enabling them to participate with similar means and conditions, various elements can be considered:

- **Requirement to present a programme or vision.** This will help ensure that children are selected or elected based on a set of proposed actions and priorities, rather than based on their personality only. Furthermore, it will secure a certain level of motivation and dedication on the part of candidates to run for office.
- **Provision of channels and opportunities for candidates to run a campaign.** Candidates organize presentations of their programmes and have spaces to place their campaign posters, for example.
- **Provision of support to candidates.** This option ensures that that lack of resources and social capital does not deter potential candidates. It can consist in material support, by making available tools, office supplies and other needed equipment to run the

campaign. It can also involve advice and mentoring, to help children formulate and present their ideas, and to help them navigate the exposure their candidacy may imply.

- **Avoiding criteria that could lead, even if unintentionally, to discrimination against, or exclusion of, some children.** Any criterion related to school attendance, school performance, writing and public speaking skills, needs to be set with great caution and an analysis of its impact on potential candidates properly conducted.
- **Avoiding presenting the selection process as a competition.** In this case, there are no winners or losers. This option ensures that everyone who has expressed willingness to participate in local decision-making can have a role. While election or another selection process may confer certain powers, such as the ability to vote in the council, a specific role can be recognized to candidates who were not elected but want to contribute.
- **Making space for the involvement of non-members.** This option ensures large membership to the council without limitations.

### Examples: Understandings and implementation of representative democracy in child and youth councils

Up to now, participants to the youth council of Schiltigheim (France) have been elected by vote. Interested children register, campaign with posters in school, and publish a campaign speech online. All children can vote, but candidates must be aged 9 or 10 years to run. Those not elected have become citizenship ambassadors and have association with informal mechanisms of participation. Yet, it was noted that some young people were motivated by fame or were being elected because they were popular, but then showed limited presence and dedication. As a result, future plans include putting up a form on the website of the Maison des Jeunes Citoyens (Citizen Youth Centre) to instruct candidates present their motivations for running. Youth council facilitators could then read the form and tell children whether they can join the council. In addition, there will be opportunities to join the council for the duration of a project only.

All young people between ages of 14 and 18 years and living in Regensburg (Germany) can stand for election to the council by sending an application to the municipal youth office. They get their own posters and flyers from the youth office and campaign as candidates. Before the election, all candidates attend an introductory seminar where learn about the role of the council. Each young person can vote, and voting takes place in schools and youth centres. The selections include a total of 25 councillors and 5 deputies. Adults involved in the process find that a formal voting system has challenges and requires significant logistic and other organization.

Each school in Akureyri (Iceland) has a representative in the council. All children aged 12 to 18 years and living in Akureyri can participate. Interested children submit an anonymous application, justifying why they would like to participate, what their goals are and who they are as a person. Then the youth council votes. Due consideration is given to the need to keep a gender balance and reach all minority groups. The last application round was very popular due to promotion on social media, especially Instagram, and support from sponsors. However, there is a wish from young people to change the process to one where candidates have to campaign, and all young people get to vote.

Child and youth council members are elected through a process mirroring the election process for the members of the Dobong-gu's (Republic of Korea) parliament. Child candidates are invited to come up with their own solutions to address problems of their society and children vote for those who have a solution they favour and can represent the local community. For child and youth council members who successfully secured votes, they confidently expressed that they represented the society by asking their friends for honest opinions on what is needed.

The members of Postojna's (Slovenia) children's council are selected from the school parliaments. Selection process varies between schools. Within school parliaments children vote their representatives for Municipal Children's Council. The city has three schools, and five members can be elected from each school. The children's mayor is chosen each year at another school through the rotation system, and two children's deputy mayors are from the other two schools. The possibility that the children's mayor and two deputy mayors would be elected through elections and campaign was considered, but in practice, the members of Municipal Children's Council are chosen based on an agreement within the school – the mentors at school assess what is most suitable for them.

In Avilés (Spain), the council is open for everyone under 18 years of age. Members are representatives of their respective schools and bring ideas from their classmates to the activities of the council.

In Fuenlabrada (Spain) all children can be candidates, and everyone (including adults) can vote. Voting is symbolic, as all the children who present themselves as councillors become members of the council. They are not shown the percentage of votes they have received. For the local administration, this percentage allows for a diagnosis of how the group is going to be, based on the assumption that the more votes, the more involved the family is understood to be. When the election period is over, families and children are invited to explain the work of the council is. Families are an active part, as they are engaged in the establishment of the council and are familiar with how it operates. A lot of emphasis is placed on the fact that it is not a competition, it is about raising awareness of the responsibility that comes with being a councillor.

When the youth council elections are about to start, all young people in Stuttgart (Germany) between 14 to 18 years of age receive an information leaflet and a form to register as a candidate. The district-level councils are also actively promoting their work themselves. One candidate explains:

*I heard about the youth council through school. Our old youth council leader came to visit and looked through the classes and asked who was 13 or 14 years old, because you have to be that age to participate. And at that time, I was still twelve and that was kind of a pity because I was actually very interested in it. When I was about 15, the term of office of the old youth councils was over. And then the old youth councils came to our school and presented the youth council again. And then I took the chance and just applied.*

Her brother had received flyers about the council, which caught her attention. The council also has a website and an Instagram account that include all necessary information.

## How long do members serve for?

There are various dimensions to consider when determining the term for council members, namely:

- The need to ensure the frequent renewal of the council.
- The importance of enabling children to build their capacities over time.
- The fact that as they grow, children's interests and dedication may evolve, whether it is about preferring other forms or topics of engagement, or on the contrary wanting to invest even more into their role as members as they feel more at ease with it
- Offering the possibility for children to be members at regular intervals so children have frequent opportunities to get involved and being a council member is not a now or never decision
- The fact that even if the child and youth council mirrors the city council, terms do not need to be of the same duration. Children do not experience timeframes as adults do. Four or five years for an adult would not be very long, but for a child, four years would be a long time.
- The way children are selected may impact the duration of the mandate. For example, if children are selected from other councils (e.g., school or district council), they draw their mandate from their participation in these bodies and their membership would probably need to end together with that other term.

In light of these considerations, several options can be contemplated:

- Considering a term of one to two years would usually address the concerns mentioned.
- The council can either be renewed entirely at once, or in shifts. For example, for each child the term is two years, but every year half of the council is renewed.
- Former members of the council can be given an official role as advisers to new members.

**Examples:**  
**The importance of motivating children**

Children highlighted a broad range of factors that encouraged them to get involved. Some of them were inspired to apply through their work in the school council. One of them, involved in school council work in the Jyväskylä (Finland) since the first grade, explains: *I wanted to represent [young people]. I thought hey, I'm fairly intelligent, maybe I can do something good. I thought that the youth council was actually important, compared to school council where you organize a couple of parties and that's it. It was fun, so I stayed.*

Another young person from Jyväskylä confesses that she saw being a member more as a hobby at first and an opportunity to be with friends. Civic engagement was not really the motivating factor. Many of the young people have been involved several years. For them, the fact that the work and people were fun was an important factor in staying engaged. When asked what young people liked about participating, things that come up include: people, meetings, internal operations of the city, sense of community, friends, it is relaxed, importance and official status, learning new skills, learning about democracy, influencing decision-making, discussions, different perspectives, participating in events and organizing them, working together.

In the words of one young person in Lappeenranta (Finland): *"not all young people have an opinion about everything – but children and young people more broadly are interested and engaged when the issue is important to them."*

Another commented: *I had a preconception that everyone will sit quietly, and the president will speak in a depressing voice and everyone is seated around a roundtable with a document in front of them. I thought it would be really serious, and people would be using political jargon, so it was a bit of a surprise when at the first meeting people were talking, and it was fun!*

Adults confirmed that many children have said that they wanted to join because they thought it would be fun. Others also clearly have a wish to "make an impact."

Making new friends and skills development were also important. Some young people find it important to find a group they feel part of. Some members might have for example mental health issues that have prevented them from finding likeminded company elsewhere. The fees the youth council members get from the meetings are also a motivating factor for some.

## **How will the council organize its work?**

**Child and youth councils have many different ways of operating.** It is important to decide together with members of the council their preferred way of working. This will depend on the scope of the mandate of the council, as well as children's own availability as participating in such mechanisms can represent a significant commitment for children who will have to manage various priorities in their lives. Issues to consider include:

- **Formal working structures:** Will the council operate only in plenary session or will it have working groups or committees on specific themes? Having topic-based working groups enables council members to specialize in specific areas of interests, reinforcing their motivation, ability to form an informed opinion in a technical area, and, therefore, their role in influencing that particular topic. However, it also requires ensuring that mechanisms are in place for members belonging to various committees to communicate through regular plenary sessions and other communications tools.

- **Formal roles:** Will some members of the council have specific roles e.g., chair, vice-chair(s), secretary, treasurer? If so, it will be important for the council to define their role, how they are selected and for how long. This is an element young people can valuably decide themselves.
- **Frequency of the meetings:** How often will the council meet? Having regular meetings ensures the regular engagement of children in the municipality's matters. It also contributes to team building and the development of interpersonal links and skills needed to move projects forward. It is important however to ensure that meetings have a clear goal and function (such as following up on initiatives, reviewing proposed policies, organizing an event, preparing a statement) and are not organized just for the sake of having a meeting. Regular meetings can be organized with a regular schedule, so that members can plan their timetable ahead and there is no need to actively plan them (e.g., first Thursday of the month, every other Tuesday). It is important to be mindful that beyond formal meetings, members may meet informally to work on projects for example, and they may have limited time available.
- **Meeting location:** Where and how will the council meet? Council and committee meetings can be held in-person and online. While in-person meetings will usually allow for discussions of a higher quality and enable children to enjoy an important part of their engagement – socialize and have fun – online meetings may also offer the possibility of a wider participation. However, attention needs to be paid to the availability of adequate equipment and internet connections for children to participate. In-person meetings should ideally take place in an appropriate space for children, where they can have easy exchanges and conduct relevant activities involving movement and arts and crafts as part of their work. City council meeting rooms for instance, may not offer an appropriate setting for children to reflect collectively, but rooms may be used on more official occasions for children to present their views to adults in a formal setting and have them recorded.

**Examples:  
Various ways in  
which child and youth  
councils organize  
their work**

In Jyväskylä (Finland) the official youth council meetings take place every three weeks. In addition, the council meet with different working groups, and some representatives attend city council and department board meetings. The youth council has a leadership team that also has its own meetings, where the agenda of upcoming meetings is decided (everyone is invited to contribute, and these meetings are usually open to everyone). Sometimes meetings take place more frequently, for example when preparing for a project. Overall, all youth council meetings are open to everyone. Every fall, the youth council reviews their rules and code of conduct, and sometimes makes changes.

The municipal council for children and young people in Avilés (Spain) has a mandate, which regulates what it is, who forms part of the council and what its mission is. The children's council meets in smaller participation groups or plenary sessions. In plenary sessions, the council meets with local political officials (mayor or councillors representing the council and elected in each legislature). The participation groups manage the day-to-day work and are supported by a civil society organization dedicated to enhancing child participation, Los Glayus. Work in groups is found to be more operational as it enables to children to meet in smaller groups based on their age, day of preference, and respective timetable. These groups are also less formal, as they operate without official regulations. While Avilés has both mechanisms (formal council and participation groups), some other municipalities in the region of Asturias only work with participation groups.

Children participating in the National Council of Children and Adolescents of Catalonia (CNIAC) (Spain) belong to local participation councils. Within the CNIAC, the work is divided among different groups: working committees that are permanent, and temporary working groups for different projects. The group is directed by its own board, including a president, two vice-presidents and a secretary. Children meet in assemblies, every four months. The committees have their own function, and they usually meet once a month.

## Consultations with peers

Representing peers' views involves knowing what these views are. As mentioned in section 5, child and youth councils are often understood as the interface between the local government and children and young people. Part of this role involves for council members consulting with their peers, transmitting their opinions, and standing for their interests.

### Various avenues can be envisaged for the child and youth council to access other children's views:

- **Open the council's activities to non-members.** This will create opportunities for additional views to be heard, including the views of groups who may not be represented in the council and have specific needs and interests in relation to certain issues.
- **Encourage council members to consult with representatives from youth organizations.**
- **Encourage council members to liaise with other councils.** This would include school councils and councils in other cities or at other levels of government (see Section 5.4)
- **Invite council members to consider ways in which they can hear their peers' views** such as through:
  - Townhall meetings in which all children are invited.
  - Dialogues, exchange sessions and focus group discussions by visiting children in relevant settings, such as schools, sports clubs, closed settings with due respect for necessary safeguards, social centres, specific areas or neighbourhoods, among others.
  - Surveys through in-person interviews, online or on paper.
  - Informal discussions with peers, bearing in mind that views shared may be anecdotal and not necessarily (statistically) representative.
  - A dedicated email address or social media account through which children can share their views.

### Examples: Different ways in which council members consult their peers

In Kufstein (Austria), all children and young people can participate in all meetings and activities of the council whenever they want. Only the budget can be voted by elected members but otherwise everyone can have a say.

School council representatives in the Collège Ariane in Guyancourt (France) share questionnaires in their respective classes on the issues their peers would like to share. Sometimes students also contact the delegates directly.

**Example:  
Enabling children  
to create their own  
working methods**

In one youth council, most of the young people had received some information about the council before joining, for example, through the school council trainings or the city's website. However, some commented that they were surprised by how formal the council was in contrast to school councils where he had been previously involved. He explains: *I remember coming to the first youth council summit at the city hall, and all council members were wearing dresses and ties, and I came up in a hoodie [...] the youth council operates in close collaboration with the city council, so this kind of formality and seriousness has trickled down to the youth council. I think it's a good thing, but it was a bit of a culture shock.*

One of the challenges for youth councils is that they get absorbed into the bureaucracy of the local government and thereby become invisible and less attractive to other children.

Municipalities often require that children adapt to their working methods rather than creating more child friendly environment that adapt to young people's needs. Examples have arisen where there might be a 500-page list of issues to review within a week. Meetings can last for hours – one young person said that he had once sat at a city council meeting until 3am in the morning. Working methods of these bodies would need to be adapted to young people's needs to be truly meaningful.

Despite these challenges, young people are really committed to their role as department broad representatives – indeed, sometimes they are so committed that adult representatives in the same department boards start to find it laborious to respond to questions and other queries, and there might not be enough time to address all of them during meetings. In Jyväskylä (Finland), the current youth council has discussed how to engage the broader youth council in this work, as often the young people feel a bit alone in their role as representatives.

## 5.2 Other institutional participation structures

Although child and youth councils are the most common institutionalized forms of participation, formal consultations take place through other means. This is particularly the case where the local governments do not have child and youth councils in place, or when the local government wishes to reach children beyond these structures. It is always recommended that the local child and youth council should be involved in defining and supporting additional outreach to children.

Other forms of institutionalized participation may play an important role in offering children and young people opportunities to participate in local decision-making processes. These may include, for example:

- **Participatory budgeting processes.** Children have the opportunity to influence local budgeting for children. They may find opportunities for participation through schools, school councils, the child and youth council, or be open to everyone directly.
- **Special advisory groups for smaller target groups of children.** These may include for example advisory groups for children in care, migrant and asylum-seeking children, or children with disabilities. Targeted advisory groups may play an essential role in offering children the opportunity to advance issues that only affect a minority of children – for example, influencing local decision-making regarding children in care.

→ **Service delivery.** Local governments may establish special review advisory groups of children who are users of a particular service. Children may also play a role in formal service delivery review committees or participate in tendering services.

The list above is not exhaustive, and each local government may have multiple institutionalized forms of participation existing in parallel. However, the local government should seek to ensure that these forms of participation are in dialogue with each other and other groups in the community. The varying participation groups should be aware of each other, and municipality-wide participation mechanisms such as the child and youth council should be mindful of opportunities to interact with other participating groups or councils or other forms of participation groups in the municipality (see the section below on interlinkages).

As with child and youth councils, it is essential to ensure that these other forms of participation are inclusive and involve children and families from vulnerable groups (see Section 7). The recommendations in this study on ensuring the inclusiveness, meaningfulness, and effectiveness of participation mechanisms can also be applied to these forms of participation.

### Example: Child participation in budgeting

The Youth Participatory Budget (YPB) of Cascais (Portugal) involves students between 10 and 18 years of age in political decision-making and gives them a voice on how public officials should spend public investments. Furthermore, it is a pedagogical project that aims to train students on their rights and to promote civic participation of the younger generation in all decisions that affect them. The pilot project started in the 2016–2017 school year through the foundation of a multidisciplinary team in the city council with representatives from different departments (education, communication, youth) and the selection of four schools from different districts. One class in each school acts as participation ambassadors who are responsible for implementing and facilitating the YPB.

From September until December, students and teachers participate in trainings on collaborative democracy. In January, sessions are held in each school to make decisions on how the budget should be spent. The ambassadors moderate round tables where students discuss ideas, vote for the three best proposals to be implemented in their school and agree on one proposal for the whole community. Subsequently, the ambassadors check the feasibility of the ideas and organize a meeting including teachers, the project team, and the school director to make a final decision on which proposal(s) will be listed in the ballot papers. All students vote for the best ideas to be implemented in school and community. Since 2016, the project has grown to include 15 schools in the city. The budget allocated for each school has increased from € 2,500 to € 10,000 Euros per school. Ideas for the broader community achieve a maximum amount of € 350,000 Euros.

**Example: Engaging children and young people in review of service delivery**

The London Borough of Redbridge's (UK) democratic structure includes an External Scrutiny Panel, which has a role in scrutinizing the appropriateness and effectiveness of the strategies and policies of external partners, including but not limited to the Police, the Probation Service, the Fire and Rescue Authority and transport providers and to review their performance. As many of these services directly impact the lives of children and young people, for the last three years, the Panel has held an annual meeting with local children and young people. The aim of these meetings has been to offer young people an opportunity to raise the issues that were concerning them across several public service agencies.

Ahead of the meeting, the local government's Youth Involvement Team supports participating young people in conducting their own research into the topics they were interested in. Subsequently, research meetings chaired by the young people are organized with relevant professionals within the local government. Recommendations from young people are included in an official Young People's Plan, which is signed off by the director responsible for children's services.

**Example: Participation for children in care**

The child and youth education institution of the City of Cologne (Germany) (abbreviated: KidS) established a complaints procedure for children and young people living in care. To ensure long-term participation of children and young people, the aim was to inform them in a sustainable and age-appropriate way about the complaints procedure and how they can get involved. The aim is to ensure children and adolescents know their rights and how they can stand up for them when they see their rights violated within the care system. Since November 2018, the KidS Parliament has met at least twice a year. In the meetings, children and young people are given the opportunity to submit their complaints and to participate in decision-making processes. The KidS Parliament currently consists of 24 children and adolescents, who are acting as spokespersons for their respective age groups and present the concerns and complaints of children and adolescents. A child participation specialist supports the activities of the Parliament. The specialist acts as the contact person for all fundamental concerns related to children's rights, participation, and complaints, and is responsible for the running of the KidS Parliament.

**Examples: Reaching out to gather children's views**

The city of Regensburg (Germany) launched a large-scale survey when the city's youth work plan was developed, where more than 1,200 children aged 14 to 18 years gave very detailed feedback about their lives in the city. They recently launched another survey on the impact of COVID-19.

A recent activity initiated by the early childhood education department of the city of Lappeenranta (Finland) was to collect mind maps from pre-primary school students about how they perceive their living environment and municipality. This spring, children have created mind maps (with drawings and educators adding some inputs in writing) about things in their living environment that children think are important and what things they would like to improve. The aim is to communicate these to the city's the development/urban planning department to demonstrate issues children value in their familiar surroundings and inform a city centre development project. It also affirmed that very young children could make a meaningful contribution to the work of the municipality.

## 5.3 The interrelationship between child and youth councils and other councils

### Between child and youth councils and school councils

Child and youth councils and school councils operating within the same area are able to tackle issues of concern to children's daily lives from different perspectives and with different authorities. Sometimes they are interlinked with child and youth council members recruited from school councils. However, this is not always the case, and it is important to ensure that there is a close relationship between the two. There are various ways through which child and youth councils and school councils can communicate:

- **Member selection and/or position within the child and youth council.** Child and youth council members may be selected among school council members. Schools may have a formal position within the child and youth council through their representatives.
- **Gathering children's views across the geographic area.** Child and youth councils may collaborate with school councils and with schools in general to collect children's views on their concerns, proposals and priorities, in order to identify topics they want to address with local officials.
- **Raising awareness on the work of the child and youth council.** School councils can help communicate with students about the work of the child and youth council, including elections, by sharing information and supporting child and youth council members' access to schools to present their work.
- **Joint initiatives.** In the implementation of specific projects, the child and youth council and the school councils may collaborate.
- **Project funding.** If the child and youth council is allocated a budget to fund child-led projects in the municipality, school councils can help disseminate calls for projects, support students in the application process, and participate in the selection of proposals.

## School councils

School councils operate within a more circumscribed setting than child and youth councils. Their mandate concerns children's immediate and daily environment, and participating children are usually students whom children in the school know and can potentially easily interact with on a day-to-day basis.

School councils are a typical feature of middle and high schools and are less frequently found in primary schools and kindergarten. There can be two or more councils in one school that gather representatives from one or several levels to ensure the relevance of discussion and preserve dynamics in which all children, regardless of their age, can fully participate. There can be various approaches to the selection of school council members. The most common model is for members to be elected by their peers, but alternatives for election exist. For example, some representatives rotate in a rotating representation, in which students take turns in participating in the school council. What matters is that students themselves be involved in deciding on the selection process and they must find that it is fair. Usually, terms are based on the school year.

Like councils established at the local level, it is important to define expectations properly in relation to school councils' role and contribution within the school. Their role can multiple:

- Provide a space where students' experiences, concerns, and views can be spoken and heard.
- Collectively reflect on ways to improve the school setting, including the school infrastructure and the school atmosphere – among students including bullying issues, and among students and teachers and other educational staff, and reach more inclusive decisions.
- Improve communication between students and education and management staff in the school.
- Plan and implement initiatives and benefit from adult support and guidance in doing so.
- Provide opportunities for skill building, in particular with respect to teamwork, leadership, policy-making, project planning and implementation, and budget management among others.
- Promote students' political engagement on broader issues, such as the environment.

Studies have found that school councils:

- Give students a sense of agency, increase their motivation within the school, foster their confidence, resulting in improved relations among students and with teachers.
- Will not result in increased participation if the council is only considered as a tool for informing students or remains limited to tokenistic participation, within the school traditional hierarchy.
- Need to be at the centre of various participatory practices within the school, rather than limited to specific projects and actions.
- May involve an elite group of students in the expectation that they will represent their peers.
- May lead to the selection of students who will support school positions, with the council not being considered by other students as a meaningful form of participation.
- May not necessarily lead to innovative and sustainable reform.
- Require mutual respect and trust for effective democratic participation.<sup>8</sup>

**Examples:**  
**The various ways in which child and youth councils and school councils are linked**

Youth council representatives in Jyväskylä (Finland) are selected from schools to ensure a strong link with and between school councils. The youth council collaborates often with school councils, for example by organizing trainings for school council members. The youth council also distributes funding for young people's projects, and often school councils have been active in applying.

In Kufstein (Austria), young people go to schools once a year to promote the work of the youth council of the city.

In Akureyri (Iceland), the youth council sees consulting with their peers as a duty and they often distribute surveys and requests for the opinions of other children and young people through schools. Youth council members explain:

*Through surveys, we have checked how the school is doing [for example] with technical literacy of youth. We practically go through the whole education policy and seeing what [for example] Giljaskóli [primary school in Iceland] has to do better. When we see something we are interested in, we dive deeper.*

The youth council steers events where children are invited to come from the schools and colleges, such as the children's congress, where children discuss issues and decisions are made on which issues they want to press for being part of the local CFCI action plan and issues they want to press the city council to discuss and act on. The Youth council wants to work more with school councils.

When the City of Oulu (Finland) distributed € 10,000 Euros to children's proposals as part of its participatory budgeting process, the school councils helped sort and narrow down the number of proposals from the schools to be put forward for potential funding and sent them to the district-level participation groups that has a representative from the school councils. Proposals included snack breaks for longer school days, and a diving platform to a nearby lake.

## **Between a municipal child and youth council and other councils at the municipal and national level**

Collaboration among similar child and youth councils operating in other municipalities and at the national level presents several advantages, including:

- Gaining knowledge on the different ways councils can be structured and operate, enabling to get inspiration to review and enhance the functioning of the child and youth council.
- Facilitating exchange of ideas for projects and policies to be proposed and implemented locally.
- Developing collaborative projects with other child and youth councils.
- Planning and implementing joint advocacy strategies to influence policies at the regional or national level.
- Benefiting from joint capacity-building opportunities, such as trainings and workshops.
- Meeting with other peers with a similar role and dedication, and exchanging at an interpersonal level on motivations, approaches, and challenges.

While the idea to collaborate with other councils may originate in a proposal from young members, they will often need support to identify other councils to contact for collaborative endeavours.

**To foster collaboration among councils, the following are actions to consider:**

- Identify, and as relevant, approach, other child and youth councils within the same geographic area and/or in the country.
- Identify child and youth councils or similar participation mechanisms at the national level and explore opportunities for collaboration.
- Support gatherings of various child and youth councils within the same region or geographic area.
- Encourage twinning of child and youth councils in two municipalities sharing common features (e.g., size of the population, urban/rural/mountainous/seaside, socio-economic situation).
- Promote the creation or strengthening of an entity in charge of coordinating exchanges among child and youth councils and supporting their capacities, such as a network or federation.
- Promote the creation or strengthening of a national council, that has linkages with child and youth councils at the local level, through member recruitment, consultations, ability for local council members to participate in activities and express their views and joint projects.

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**Examples:**  
**Linkages between local child and youth councils and other child and youth councils**

The Youth council of Schiltigheim (France) is a member of the National Association of Children and Youth councils (ANACEJ). The Association selects two children or adolescents to participate in the High Council for the Family, Childhood and Aging, an advisory council to the Prime Minister, which role is to promote public debate and advise the government on cross-cutting issues related to these themes, with an intergenerational approach.

The Youth council of Poznań (Poland) has no budget but has found that having a budget would enable it to run its own initiatives, without having to apply for a grant. It has therefore taken action at the national level to promote legislation that would ensure that youth councils across the country have their own budget:

*We raised the issue of the lack of budget by youth councils at the national level when preparing the amendment of the Youth councils Act. This was taken into account and in the already amended Act each youth council should have a statutory guaranteed budget.*

The child and youth council in Avilés (Spain) collaborates actively with other municipal children's councils in the region and participates in meetings and get-togethers with children's councils at the regional, state and international levels to exchange ideas and collaborate. One of the characteristics of children's participation in the region of Asturias (where Avilés is located) is the capacity they have to set up networks or to establish relationships. Local councils work as a network, and council members have always been involved in processes outside their city or community. When national meetings are organized, the councillors meet with council members from other communities. Avilés has also promoted international collaboration and organized the first European meeting of child and youth councils together with UNICEF in 2018.

The local participation council of Fuenlabrada (Spain) is part of the Red de Infancia y Adolescencia (Childhood and Adolescence Network), which gathers 21 municipalities in the Community of Madrid and two in Castilla la Mancha and holds annual meetings. Since the pandemic, the Intermunicipal Participation Commission has been created, in which children and adolescents from 23 municipalities participate twice a month, in virtual format.



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## 6. Effective child participation: Decision-making power and influence

*We feel that we are taken seriously, and that we make a difference because: We can influence decisions or make decisions ourselves. The adults give us the space to do so. We produce results, and we can see the results of our work. A lot of our proposals and decisions have been converted into action. Adults support focus on results.*

*(Members of the Council for Children's Rights, Herningvej Skole, Aalborg, Denmark)*

## 6.1 Mandate and decision-making power (opportunities to influence decisions)

The level of influence of a child and youth council depends on a range of factors. As a formal mechanism, it is essential to consider whether and how this influence can be institutionalized within decision-making processes at the local level. This will ensure that the participation of children in matters that affect them at the local level is inscribed within regular practices and processes over the long run and does not depend on the officials in charge at a certain moment. Various elements need to be considered to enhance the influence of the child and youth council in local decision-making:

- **The level of decision-making power** the child and youth council has.
- **The channels** through which it can influence decision-making.
- **The topics/areas** it is able to influence.

### Example: Challenges in understandings of representative participation

In one city, the CFCI coordinator points out that many stakeholders are often solicited to bring in young people's views when setting up an event or a campaign. However, there is still a limited understanding of what participation means, which implies that there is sometimes too much focus on these representative groups instead of day-to-day participation. Key challenges are still adult attitudes and the support of managers, including participation in daily life, establishing a clear action plan with roles and responsibilities, increasing awareness among staff, decision-makers and children themselves, laying out a solid communication plan to accompany the work, the participation of all children as opposed to focusing on representative structures and 'an average child', and finally, making sure that the resources needed to support participation are closely tied to the city's overall budgeting process. Resourcing and coordination are still challenging although there is a clear, written down commitment to participation.

### Level of decision-making power of the child and youth council

A child and youth council can have different levels of influence, depending on the weight their views have in decision-making. Beyond informal aspects, the way child participation in decision-making is structured will determine how much influence the child and youth council have in the process. As mentioned in Section 3.3, there can be various levels of participation, and these will determine the level of engagement of children in decision-making. For child and youth councils, experience shows that these levels of child participation can translate into the following concrete implications:

#### *Child-led participation*

- Decision-makers give the responsibility to make decisions to the child and youth council to make decisions in specific areas of local administration and policy-making, for example local childhood policies. It is in charge of designing the plan.
- Decision-makers allocate a budget to the child and youth council so it can undertake its own initiatives or fund child-led and youth-led projects, through calls for proposals for example. Children and young people decide how they want to use the resources, and adults are only providing overall supervision and support.

- The children and young people manage their own meetings with adults acting as observers and resource persons but keeping away from intervening in discussions unless necessary. Children and young people decide on the agenda through processes they control, and they chair the meeting.
- Enabled by adults, the child and youth council, through its members, make statements to and request information from the city council, the mayor and other local officials, and these have an obligation to respond to them.

### Examples: Child-led participation in practice

In Avilés (Spain), the council has been responsible of developing the local childhood plans in 2014 and 2018. Interviewees saw this as the most important change because the children are developing a document that underpins all other actions in the city. The plan is accessible and written in child-friendly language.

In the Palomeras Bajas Public School (Madrid, Spain), children hold weekly classroom assemblies every Monday morning. They discuss issues of interest to the school and possible problems they have had in order to solve them. They also discuss the dining room, the menus, the playground, and the garden. The children discuss possible conflicts, and the child participation process contributes to conflict resolution. In the assembly, possible bullying situations are detected, as teachers observe how children interact with each other. Before the pandemic, a “Board meeting” was held every Friday, with two representatives from each class discussing issues that might be of interest to the children in the school as a whole. A teacher attends, but students manage the meeting. Students communicate the outcomes of these meetings on Mondays in each class. Every week, two students in each class moderate and take notes of the class assembly and present the outcomes of the discussion at the Friday Board meeting. Children also have a mailbox where they can put notes with problems or congratulations. Students open the mailbox every Monday. Although the assembly and the board are self-managed, the reference teachers participate. The minutes taken by the children are shared with all teaching staff. Children are involved in the implementation of decisions taken.

### *Collaborative participation*

- The child and youth council has a function mirroring that of the city council. It is, therefore, perceived as a body with a similar status when it comes to issues of concern to children and decisions are made collaboratively.
- Children and young people represent the child and youth council on the city council through their direct participation. Therefore, the child and youth council contributes to discussions like adult members. An agenda item on the city council discussions may be dedicated to topics brought up by children and young people, or the agenda will have an “any other item” category and members of the child and youth council may be able to bring issues on the agenda of the city council. However, the city council usually does not grant a right to vote on decisions.
- Children and young people from the child and youth council sit as representatives of the council on the city’s departments’ boards on an equal basis with adults and can contribute to discussions and decisions related to the administration of the city or locality through these boards. Therefore, they included in local decision-making on an ongoing basis.

**Example:  
Collaborative  
participation in  
practice**

In Jyväskylä (Finland), the youth council's role and responsibilities are outlined in formal terms of reference. The youth council is formally seated under the city council. In that way, it is very much engrained in formal decision-making within the city. The youth council has representation in four different department boards, the Disability Council and the City council. The youth council has an important role in giving feedback to the city as well whenever they have made decisions that young people do not agree with. The youth council also contributes to decision-making processes through formal statements. Formal statements, and their recording in the local government information system, is found to be the most efficient way of ensuring that young people receive feedback. For example, in 2021 the council worked on a commentary on the city's new public transport plan. Youth council members also write op-eds, organize townhalls and other events, and conduct trainings for school councils.

***Consultative participation***

- The legislation or another formal document such as terms of reference may require the local authority to consult the child and youth council to seek its views before making certain decisions.
- Identifying a need to consult with children and young people, the Mayor or other elected officials may convene the child and youth council.
- The child and youth council may be consulted informally for a number of policy-decisions. A risk, however, is that adults decide what issues need consultation and may not consult children and young people on issues that are most important to them. Therefore, it is important to ensure that channels exist for children and young people to take the initiative to have their views heard.

**Example:  
Consultative  
participation in  
practice**

In Guimarães (Portugal), the Council plays a key role in the consultations for decisions in the city or community, in general. All opinions issued by the municipal youth council have to be sent to the municipal council in order to inform elected officials. For example, in relation to the municipal budget, the youth council constitutes a commission in charge of developing a formal opinion on behalf of the municipal youth council on the proposed budget, which they send to the municipal council. The council also plays a key role in the development of the Municipal Youth Plan.

Overall, it is important to encourage municipality representatives and officials to be proactive in communicating with and working collaboratively with the child and youth council. Often the initiative has to come from the children and young people themselves. Adults in the municipality would also have a role in facilitating decision-making in the municipality making it more accessible to children and young people. For example, there is often very little information shared with children and young people in child-friendly formats.

**Example:  
Recognizing that  
creating spaces for  
participation is a  
gradual process in  
Madrid**

In Madrid (Spain), adults working with children explain that awareness raising around the child and youth council is done in three phases. First, an awareness raising and alliance-building phase through schools, social organizations, and non-formal spaces such as leisure and sports associations. The aim is to create spaces for participation wherever children spend time. The access to children in these different spaces varies, as they very much rely on adults supporting the mission – therefore, institutional alliances are crucial. Second, so-called participation points are opened for those interested, for example in school. Third, some of these interested children and young people are then elected to the actual child and youth council, which is divided into two age groups 6 to 12 years, and 13 to 17 years. Each district has a series of tools and procedures for electing representatives, always within the limits of the regulations. They offer some recommendations on what could improve interaction with children to give them meaningful space and time to develop their ideas:

→ Do not offer ideas, offer blank sheets of paper, safe and diverse spaces for development and tools. Listen actively:

*We come from a very adult-centric culture and often, in a kind way, we try to [lead the way], and what we should do is to offer [the space] with tools and facilitation.*

→ Be aware of adult anxieties about making sure meeting objectives are met:

*This often means [adults] impose ideas and proposals on children [...] because they are worried about external expectations. These anxieties have nothing to do with children.*

*This must be taken into account because in participatory processes it is important to adapt to children's time frames and agendas and ways of working.*

→ Adults should be there to support the children to generate the tools themselves; the process must be theirs. Decision-making and working on communication and group cohesion is essential, as well as a sense of the common good:

*Get away from a model based on the idea of 'I offer [this opportunity to] you as an adult, and if you fancy, you get it'. Instead encourage more autonomy in decision-making.*

## **Level of interaction between the child and youth council and decision-makers**

In addition to the level of engagement by children and young people provided through the council, it is important to consider how they share their views with decision-makers. That is, will the young people have direct access to elected officials; what will be the frequency of

these interactions; and can children request time to speak beyond planned meetings? These questions are essential.

*By participating in it we are giving a voice to many children and giving a point of view that an adult doesn't have. Looking at things that an adult's way of thinking would not do... A child's way of thinking and an adult's way of thinking are different, we have different opinions and needs.*

*(Member of the youth council of Fuenlabrada, Spain)*

*When COVID was starting, I sat a meeting with the educational council and was discussing how the regulations should be in school regarding infection control. So maybe our influence does not come straight from the youth council but rather through us as members of other councils and committees.*

*(Member of the youth council, Akureyri, Iceland)*

### **Direct access to elected officials**

Directly interacting with decision-makers is key for children and young people to be able to present their views and proposals. It ensures that:

- Children and young people are able to communicate their opinions in their own words and from their perspectives.
- Children and young people feel that decision-makers hear and consider them and their views.
- Children and young people can have an in-depth discussion on their proposals with officials, understand the proposal's strength and limitations, and receive feedback from officials.

Elected officials understand the value of the direct participation of children in decision-making.

- There are various ways through which members of the child and youth council can directly communicate with officials:
- Invite officials to participate in some of the child and youth council's meetings.
- Ensure that members of the child and youth council can participate in the city council's meetings by attending and being able to make formal statements.
- Dedicate an agenda item within city council meetings to hearing views and proposals from the child and youth council.
- Enable members of the child and youth council to participate in city council's topic-based committees.
- Enable members of the child and youth council to participate in the administration's department boards.
- Ensure that members of the child and youth council have contact information for city officials and are able to contact them, freely and directly.

**Examples:**  
**Direct communication  
with local officials**

Interaction with decision-makers can take many forms. For example, in Lappeenranta (Finland), children and young people have the following access:

- An annual assembly with local government leadership, which is planned now to expand to every six months, and with department directors from the local government participating.
- The youth council has sponsors among city council representatives from different parties, who attend youth council meetings and share updates, which is highly appreciated by the young people.
- The youth council members have the opportunity to have a personal sponsor within the city council if they wish.
- Interaction with city council representatives can also be informal, for example, the young people mention an upcoming sports tournament.
- City officials from the different departments are able to come to present upcoming projects and policies at youth council meetings. These happen regularly when there are major decisions taking place within the city.

In Fuenlabrada (Spain), communication with decision-makers is very direct, and mostly happens through face-to-face meetings. As a young member of the council said: *Whenever possible, we try to talk directly to the councillor for children or the mayor, and we communicate the proposals directly. Sometimes we can't, or they or we are busy, but normally we can do it like this. They make it easy and are very approachable. We don't have a pattern per se for proposals, but every year we meet on 20th November, Children's Day, and the mayor attends.*

Members of the child and youth council also regularly meet with other elected officials. The councillor for children in particular is a close resource for the youth council within the local government.

As underlined by a member of the youth council of Poznań (Poland): *We present our opinions in the form of a resolution, petition and send it to the Poznań City council. When necessary, we take the floor during a meeting of the City council. We deal with many issues at meetings with representatives of the city council as well as with the Mayor and municipality officials.*

Another member added: *Councillors know about our presence and our activities. We are very often involved in the activities of the Poznań city council. We attend city council sessions where we often speak." The youth council members in Poznań would however welcome a more collaborative relationship with the city. They comment: "It is young people who take the initiative to observe what is happening during city council meetings. We would expect it to be the city council that asks us for our opinions on different issues. It would be important to increase integration between the two councils and to do more together.*

*The city council always accepts our projects. We know that we will always have an elected official behind us to support us.*

*(Member of the child and youth council, Shiltigheim, France)*

### **Through adult facilitators**

Child and youth councils usually benefit from the support of adult facilitators. These facilitators follow the young people's work and help organize their meetings. In addition, facilitators assist in preparing their contributions and communicate their views and proposals. Therefore, these facilitators may play an important role in conveying and explaining children and young people's views. They can be critical in enhancing the child and youth council's influence in decision-making. Yet, their involvement needs to take place in support of children and young people's voices and should not become a substitute for children and young people's ability to directly express their views and engage in processes. As child participation mechanisms and practices at the local level are strengthened, children and young people gain expertise and confidence. As adults become more skilled in interacting with and listening to young people, the role of adult facilitators should logically diminish. Therefore, their role should be one that evolves over time rather than having a fixed function or functions.

### **In relation to intermediating with decision-makers, actions that can be taken by adult facilitators include:**

- Establish channels of communication between members of child and youth council and decision-makers.
- Communicate and support children and young people's views with decision-makers and elaborate on the rationale for such views.
- Remind decision-makers of the importance of hearing children and young people's views on various matters.
- Attend meetings between children and young people and decision-makers, facilitate communication, give explanations when necessary, and use their experience to draw lessons for future interactions.
- Help children and young people select proposals and recommendations that can realistically be approved without censoring their ideas.
- Support the child and youth council in developing statements and arguments to communicate to decision-makers.

**Examples:**  
**Adult facilitation and role in increasing the child and youth council's influence**

In Schiltigheim (France), the councils meet with elected representatives at a minimum every two months and more according to the request of the children and young people. The councils meet with the Mayor at least four times a year and more depending on the request of the children and young people. Outside these meetings, according to young people, advancing their proposals largely relies on the adult facilitator, who helps them contact relevant officials and communicates young people's suggestions to the city council. The facilitator serves an important function because young people cannot vote or make statements during the vote in the city council. Adults, however, consider that as professionals they act as an interface between elected officials and the youth council for the overall organization of the processes. Yet, once the communication is in place, children and young people directly meet with local officials to present their projects and discuss their recommendations.

In Fuenlabrada (Spain), adults' facilitation has been instrumental in ensuring that children and young people's proposals presented to decision-makers are realistic and can have a better chance of being accepted. In recent years, the children's project proposals have been directed towards differentiating between what can and cannot be done. An adult facilitator explains: *What we do is to design the easiest way to fulfil the proposals in the children's plan. The proposals are oriented in such a way that they are included in the children's plan, to ensure success and minimize frustration. If they have spontaneous and feasible actions, they are presented, knowing in advance that they will be approved.*

The council members of Dobong-gu (Republic of Korea) meet with the mayor once a year. They submit their own resolutions through online and offline meetings. An adult consultant helps children deliver policy suggestions to the local elected officials once a year, but children do not meet with the officials themselves. Local decision-makers then review their suggestions and reflect them in the city's policy if possible.

**Example:**  
**Using young people's acquired expertise**

The Asturian Forum (Spain) was established in 2019 out of the young people's motivation to continue participating and contributing to child participation in their municipalities despite turning 18-years-old. Its function is to advise the Asturian Childhood Observatory and the Asturian Institute of Social Care for Children in relation to child participation processes, utilizing the experience and expertise of young people aged 18 and older. Another clear objective is to disseminate youth projects and projects of interest to young people. "Continuing to contribute to the improvement of our environment is the common factor of the work we have been doing all our lives." The group is also collaborating with the University of Oviedo as child rights educators. It is currently not officially or formally constituted, but decision-makers are assessing whether it should be formalized and recognized by the Principality of Asturias.

Although young people participating in the Asturian Forum are no longer children, it was important to create autonomous, informal groups for young people to continue engaging after they are too old to be considered for membership in other local councils. According to the adults, we should:

*"formally and politically recognize these non-formal groups in the same way as is done with the mechanisms. It is an organic and practical level of participation that can be very inspiring and powerful. If we do not manage to connect the spheres of school, family, community, and municipal participation, it will be very difficult to generate a culture of child, adolescent, or youth participation. It is said that young people do not participate, but we do not consider whether there are spaces for them to participate or whether they are participating in other ways that we do not see."*

## Frequency of meetings and interactions between the child and youth council and local officials

The frequency of meetings and interactions with the local administration and elected officials is an indicator of, and a factor in, the child and youth council's status and ability to influence decisions. Regular interactions between the council and adult officials will tend to indicate that decision-makers consider children and young people key actors within the decision-making process. Conversely, when meetings are rare – e.g., once a year on World's Children's Day – officials are more likely to consider a communications event. The risk then is that child participation becomes tokenistic, as both officials and children and young people may lack the skills and long-term collaboration needed to interact meaningfully. It is, therefore, essential that officials view meetings and interactions as part of a continuous process, rather than as one-time events. Furthermore, in relation to frequency, multiplicity of interactions is an essential dimension that assists in providing children and young people with the opportunity to be involved in decision-making processes at various stages with the local authorities.

### **To that end, there are various elements to be considered and combined:**

- Establish in legislation or in the child and youth council's terms of reference a minimum number of meetings between that council and the city council. Three or four times per year would ensure some continuity between meetings with the possibility of having additional meetings.
- Establish formal commitments that entitle members of the child and youth council to attend and participate in the city council's meetings.
- Establish formal commitments that entitle members of the child and youth council to attend, and participate in, department boards' meetings.
- Introduce mechanisms that enable members of the child and youth council to contact officials — including administration officials and elected officials — easily and directly.
- Facilitate informal interactions by organizing meetings between members of the child and youth council and relevant officials, on specific themes, items, or projects.

**Examples:  
Regular interactions  
between the child  
and youth council and  
local officials**

The youth council of Akureyri (Iceland) has an annual meeting with the city council that the young people host. In addition, there is an annual meeting with the city council to discuss the general budget for the municipality. The young people also meet regularly with city decision-makers — including the mayor and the chair of the municipal council — one to three times per year to discuss their proposals and ideas, and the council members have representation in the different local government councils and committees (education and leisure, and two other councils).

The youth council of Aalborg (Denmark) has annual meetings with the mayor and the heads of different departments of the municipality. The children lead and control the meetings. The youth council has huge support and respect. The adults consider it an important part of the local political democracy and for the development and visions of sustainability.

The working relationship with local decision-makers is close and fluid in Poznań (Poland). A member of the Youth council observes:  
*Representatives of the municipality and the city council are always present at our sessions. If necessary, we organize additional meetings. Recently we had a meeting with the Deputy mayor and the Director of the Health Department. We have contacts, telephones, of the members of the city council, and we can make an appointment with them on any issue that is important to us.*

The Youth council of Guimarães (Portugal) mostly communicates their proposals to the city leadership via email – the Council has its own email address. They meet at least four times per year as required by law. Yet, they have been meeting much more frequently as the result of a deliberate objective to increase the frequency of meetings.

## 6.2 Areas of influence

The areas in which children and young people can have an impact on decision-making are an important element in determining the level of influence of the child and youth council at the local level. A key question is whether the child and youth council can have a say across areas of local administration – freely selecting the issues it wants to engage in – or whether its involvement is limited to issues traditionally perceived as specifically relevant to children only and often seen as politically minor. A valuable approach consists in engaging the child and youth council in all dimensions of local policy-making as virtually all decisions made will have an effect on children. Children and young people's views and contributions will be most valuable when considering the concrete impact of a given decision on their environment and daily lives. Children and young people will also be able to provide innovative ideas and solutions to address certain issues.

*I would also say that [one positive aspect was that] you could work on the niches, that you could really focus on small things. On topics that would otherwise perhaps get lost in the big agenda of the city council.*

*(Member of the youth council of Regensburg, Germany)*

The child and youth council should ideally be in a position to influence decisions in any policy area or sector. Yet, depending on the local government's experience in child participation, the council's contribution can be progressively expanded to new areas as the recognition of the value of its contribution grows, mechanisms for child participation in local administration are strengthened, and child and youth members' skills increase.

Specifically, the child and youth council's engagement and actual ability to influence decisions promote the following areas:

## Sectoral areas

Sectors of particular relevance to children are those where the child and youth council's participation can be most immediate and are often those cities favour and desire children's involvement. However, because of the needs of cities in all sectors and in any one sector at a particular time, children's views are crucial for the design and effective delivery of services but must be prioritized. They include, but are not limited to:

- **Recreational activities**, including culture and sports. The child and youth council can be involved in the organization of cultural events, in the design and activities of cultural facilities like libraries and cultural centres, in the planning of sports events, in the development of sports facilities and offering of sports activities, and in the building of play areas. This will help ensure that the facilities and activities proposed are relevant to children and young people and adapted to their wants and needs, also making the city's investment a better value for money.
- **Issues around mobility and public transportation**. Children and young people need to move around the city to go to school and other activities and require relevant support for their mobility, an important dimension in their daily lives. The child and youth council can provide useful advice and ideas in relation to safe routes to school, safe routes to leisure, cycling paths, traffic management, and the organization of public transportation adapted to their needs.
- **Education**. Competencies in relation to education are often shared between the State and other levels of government. School councils are established in order to involve students in the management of the school. Child and youth councils established at the local level can also promote and advise on various aspects related to education, such as: relevant dimensions of the education policy, promotion of sexual education in schools, and the design of school space.
- **Urban planning**. This is a key area in shaping the municipality, yet one in which the child and youth councils have remained limitedly involved according to available information. Ensuring that children and young people can share their views will often require building the skills of officials working in the sector, as they may be less acquainted with child participation mechanisms.
- **Health**. Child and youth councils can advise on the delivery of health services, advising on how to make them more accessible and child- and adolescent-friendly, and relevant to children's and young people's needs.

### Example: Children advocating to address youth homelessness

In the United States of America, in Prince George's County, Maryland, at least 1,656 young people are experiencing homelessness and as many as 42,000 youth may be at risk. To address the issue together with young people, the county established a Youth Action Board in 2019. It is a decision-making and advocacy body comprised entirely of local youth and young adults with lived experience of homelessness or housing instability. Two of the youth were hired to serve as the Youth Action Board Co-Chairs, who lead the group. The Youth Action Board meets twice a month for official board meetings. Additional convenings include professional development trainings, team building activities, community service events, and legislative advocacy. All youth who have attended meetings for at least one month and completed a membership application are voting members.

The Youth Action Board co-authored the County's Coordinated Community Plan to address youth homelessness and evaluated and approved all projects funded in response to that plan. In collaboration with Prince George's County's Continuum of Care and Youth Homelessness Steering Committee, the Youth Action Board continues to oversee implementation, monitoring, and continuous quality improvement of all County projects to address youth homelessness. The Youth Action Board is also tasked with providing direct input on all issues related to youth homelessness across county governance structures. In addition, the Youth Action Board advocates for local and state policies, legislation, and budgetary changes to improve the supportive services and resources available to youth who have experienced homelessness.

Beyond the County, the Youth Action Board has had a significant impact at the state level. Following their advocacy efforts, the State of Maryland passed laws both supporting a minor's right to consent to shelter, and waiving tuition costs at public institutions of higher education for youth who have experienced homelessness or been in foster care.

## Overarching policy areas

These areas usually set or reflect the local government's priorities and are cross-cutting as they involve various sectors of local administration and require coordination among departments. Local governments should involve the child and youth council in the design and implementation of such policies to make sure to integrate children and young people's views and concerns.

- **Budgeting.** The city's budget mirrors the city's priorities and is a determining factor in ensuring interventions for children and young people. Having the child and youth council participate in the elaboration of the budget means giving it a high status and ensuring that children and young people's interests are duly represented in budgetary discussions.
- **Youth policy.** Many cities develop youth policies, and it is important to closely involve the child and youth council in the design of the plan, ideally on an equal basis with adult city council members.
- **Delivery of public services,** including social and health care services. The child and youth council can be consulted on the location of new services, their accessibility to families and to young people who may need to access health care on their own, their quality, and their overall child-friendliness.
- **Anti-discrimination policy.** Children and young people can be particularly sensitive to various forms of discrimination and be aware of the daily barriers some groups face in the

enjoyment of their rights and access to services and activities the municipality offers. The views of the child and youth council in this area are particularly valuable.

- **Environmental issues.** These issues are often of particular interest to children and young people and cut across all sectors of local government. They can be far-reaching and allow for the involvement of the child and youth council in numerous decisions.
- **COVID-19 pandemic related decisions.** From the beginning of the health crisis, it has appeared that decisions taken to contain the transmission of COVID-19 have significantly affected children and young people without them being able to participate in the decision-making process. The child and youth council should therefore be able to have children and young people's interests taken into consideration and influence decisions made.
- **CFCI related actions.** All actions related to the CFCI need to involve the child and youth council as an organizing principle of the municipality's participation in the Initiative.

### Examples: Decisions that child and youth councils have influenced

The youth council of Regensburg (Germany) has been very actively involved in organizing events and different cultural opportunities for young people in the city – increasing the availability of social and cultural events for those young people under 18 years of age. Additionally, the council has been able to influence policy decisions, such as lowering the price of the public transport for children. Children and young people in the council have been involved in the development of the city's transport infrastructure, cycle routes, and the sports development plan. They also contributed to the establishment of an anti-discrimination office in the city. This was significant in a city where more than fifty per cent of migrants are under the age of 15 years, for example.

In Akureyri (Iceland), local government departments proactively send questions or proposals to the youth council in relation to all policies related to children and young people. A member of the council states:

*We have been vocal in urban planning matters. Building of new neighbourhoods and playgrounds so reviewing of local planning and all kinds of things relating to transportation including bus routes and snow removal.*

Some concrete decisions the young people have had an opportunity to contribute to have included:

- Urban planning-related decisions (e.g., commenting on the new trails in the municipality)
- Cultural activities and festivals
- Location of healthcare services
- Increasing sexual education in schools
- Education policy
- Budget plans

The Youth council of Poznań (Poland) has been able to contribute to significant changes in the city. One major achievement of the Council was the co-creation of the Strategy of the City of Poznań and the Policy of the City of Poznań Youth 2025, which defines the strategy of the city concerning young people. On a micro-level, the Youth council successfully pushed for reversing the decision to switch off lifts at bus stops during the pandemic period, which made access to the stops difficult for people with disabilities. It also effectively advocated for the creation of the School Council Fund, which was established.

One key policy change the youth council has been able to push through in Jyväskylä (Finland) is the introduction of the summer job voucher whereby the city financially supports companies who employ young people for the summer season.

In Paracuellos de Jarama (Spain), the child and youth participation program centres around a child participation council divided into 14 different sub-committees following the structure of the local government. These members are elected by their peers from each of the districts of the municipality. Each of the sub-committees is chaired by a city councillor, has around 12 members and meets at a minimum every three months. Suggestions from the committee are shared with the city council in writing. The child participation council has already made its mark in municipal decision-making, including participating in the introduction of lowered prices for cultural activities for children; selecting places in the municipality where to place speed control panels and zebra crossings; and different cultural activities, to name a few.

The youth council in Avilés (Spain) used its democratic role to achieve multiple changes within the local community. It has organized activities with the elderly, worked with special education institutions to develop a book titled 'Dictionary of emotions', and produced a guide for schools to promote gender equality in education. Young people have also influenced the city's mobility plan. Together with organizations of people with disabilities, the council has assessed whether the city is accessible. Children see the changes happening in their living environment: for example, free public transport tickets for everyone under 16 years of age.

## 6.3 Accountability and feedback loop

Accountability is one of the basic requirements for meaningful child participation. It requires ensuring that decision-makers within the local administration are held accountable for the extent to which proposals and recommendations issued by the child and youth council are followed upon and for providing feedback to child and youth members of the council. The best option is to establish an accountability system, in which providing feedback on and responding to the child and youth council's views and requests is integrated into decision-making processes involving the child and youth council. However, informal communication is also important and can be seen as complementary to official contributions.

Providing feedback helps children:

- Feel respected.
- Feel that their views are recognized and valued, and their participation is not tokenistic.
- Understand how decisions are made, existing constraints, and the limitations their proposals or views have.
- Learn how to better formulate and design proposals for them to be endorsed.

Yet members of child and youth councils frequently deplore that once they make a proposal, they do not hear back on how it has been considered, and the reason why it has not been retained. One of them explains: "Would be nice to receive more feedback so we would know what we can fix and so on. So we would understand better what we could have done better."

**Actions that can be taken to ensure adequate accountability and feedback to the child and youth council include:**

- Establishing a formal obligation to provide feedback to the child and youth council on whether, and if so how, its views have been taken into consideration in the decision-making process. This is the option of choice, as it makes the process mandatory.
- Setting up mechanisms through which members of the child and youth council can inquire on the progress of their proposals and the influence of their views, and they will receive an answer.
- Developing formal communication channels between decision-makers and members of the child and youth council, so the latter can follow the decision-making process.
- Developing informal communication channels between decision-makers and members of the child and youth council, so that the exchange of information is regular and fluid.

**Example:  
Children's frustration  
when not taken  
seriously**

It is not enough to listen. If the children's views are not respected and the outcomes always simply follow the adult agenda, then, children have no say in issues that affect them. Young people gave an example of a recent debate regarding vegetarian school meal options. The youth council and the youth climate advisory group (Finland) had been advocating for an improvement in the quality of vegetarian meals at school. Accordingly, a motion to that effect was put forward in the city council. However, it was rejected because it would have meant a € 43,000 Euros increase to a school meal budget. The young people felt that out of a total budget of € 2 million Euros this represented a very small budgetary increase and that their fact-based and very well-prepared arguments were disregarded with jokes by adults.

**Examples:  
Ensuring  
accountability vis-à-  
vis child and youth  
councils at the local  
level**

Feedback and communication must be systematic so that young people know if and how their views have been taken into account by decision-makers.

In Lappeenranta (Finland), the young people proposed the following measures to strengthen the system:

- The local council should commit to a systematic approach to feedback as a key element of participation as part of the city's CFCI goals.
- When the youth council makes a formal statement, they should receive feedback via their adult coordinators on whether it has been discussed at a meeting, accepted, or agreed.
- When a decision is deferred or it is likely to take a while for a resolution to be made, supporting adults should take responsibility for keeping track on progress and providing regular feedback to the youth council.
- If young people's views are not agreed with, the decision-makers should commit to providing an explanation not only of what the decision is, but how it was made and why.

In Guyancourt (France), the school council is engaged in the organization of different events including Christmas festivities, Carnival, inviting external speakers to the school, ecological activities, awareness-raising activities in classes. For example, the council hosted events on disabilities, and promotion of theme days, and coordination with student clubs. For example, the council set up a bread collection with a gachimeter where they put the bread to create awareness of food waste. The bread was then used to feed the chickens. The gachimeter had graduations, which enabled students to have an idea of what it represents in the real life. The adult supporter of the school council indicated:

*The main idea is that the students can participate in everything as much as possible. As soon as they feel like bringing up a subject or setting up a project, they talk to the principal, who may or may not give her approval.*

In Stuttgart (Germany), young councillors discuss their ideas among themselves and put them to a vote. To take the selected ideas forward, they can call a meeting, prepare a written request, or make a phone call to city officials. Depending on the format they submit their ideas in, they will receive feedback. Often, when they send a written proposal, they get feedback very quickly. Feedback of written proposals of the city-wide youth council must be signed by the mayor. Decision-makers are also invited to meetings to provide feedback.

Feedback to proposals from the youth council in Poznań (Poland) depends on the format in which the proposal was presented. Formal proposals require a formal response, whereas if children and young people feedback informally, they may get a response via phone or email. Often this is mediated by the Youth Officer in the local government. The Youth council is always involved in implementing activities it has initiated.

In Madrid (Spain), feedback and follow-up are highly recommended although not mandatory. At the city level, there is usually a response to some of the proposals from the previous plenary. At the district level, feedback is sometimes provided two or three months after the plenary session.

The youth council of Regensburg (Germany) is a formal mechanism advising the Mayor and the city council. As a result, it is part of the city's organizational chart, just like other advisory councils. Its role is to ensure that the perspective of young citizens is systematically included. It therefore has the right to apply to the youth welfare committee to monitor that this is the case. The youth council also has the power to make inquiries with the specialised departments in the administration.

The Children's Parliament – Kinderparlament (KiPa) – of Bern (Switzerland) gives children the possibility to contribute to direct democracy and provides a channel to approach the local government directly with their ideas. The city government must consider each proposal and provide a qualified answer within six months, whether a wish or an idea can be realized. The KiPa is central to the city's 'regulation on participation for children and youngsters', passed by the city parliament in 2003. The KiPa is open to all children in the city aged 8 to 13, regardless of legal status. A similar Youth Parliament is available for older children and young adults. In parallel to the Children's and Youth Parliaments, the city offers the opportunity for young people to pass youth motions to the local government. The motions are often first discussed in the Youth Parliament. After a first consideration and a round of feedback from the government, it is forwarded to the city parliament. There it is discussed in the presence of youth representatives. If the motion is endorsed by the city parliament, it must be implemented within the next year. If not, the government will further consider its feasibility, and must provide an answer within six months.



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## 7. Inclusive child participation: Including children from different backgrounds and life experiences

The right to participate extends to all children. However, one of the consistent challenges child and youth councils face is ensuring that they are inclusive and welcoming to all children. It is relatively easy to recruit children in the mainstream of education, who are more confident, articulate, and informed. Far harder to engage are children, for example, who are in residential care, asylum seekers and refugees, children with disabilities, children in detention, or children who are out of school.

*[T]here are weaknesses in the process for selecting participants to the youth council. The process varies significantly between schools and is very much dependent on the responsible teachers within the schools who tend to select the kind of representatives they want. For example, there's no representative from a local specialized school for children with disabilities and special needs, although it would be important to include their voices. Vocational schools are also not well represented.*

There are three challenges to overcome:

- How to identify and connect to children who are not easily approached through the usual avenues.
- How to engage those hard-to-reach children – motivating and convincing them that their views are wanted, and that they will be accepted.
- How to address the barriers that they might face in participating in a child and youth council, such as lack of confidence, fear of bullying or rejection, lack of devices to communicate online, lack of money for fares to get to meetings, or language barriers.

**Example:  
Using multiple  
different routes to  
engage children**

Adults point out that a fundamental element for inclusion is the different pathways — educational, social, and non-formal — that allow access to very diverse children. Currently, districts together with children are drawing up regulations, which must be ratified by the local council, that require places to make reservations and reserve areas for people with disabilities. In the district of Puente de Vallecas (Spain), inclusion is one of the objectives. They acknowledge that the child and youth council is a friendly space with open doors where everyone can and wants to participate. In some districts, officials provide participation points in special education centres so that little by little they can be introduced to the participatory culture and, if they wish, become part of child and youth council. They emphasise that, overall, children and adolescents are very empathetic, and it is from them that attention to diversity is born. When they must elect their representatives, they already do so with this view of inclusion- of gender, age, diversity. It arises organically.

## 7.1 Identifying children from marginalized communities

As a starting point, it is important to have a clear understanding of the different groups of children within the community and where they are located.

### Action to reach out and connect with different groups could involve:

- Undertake a mapping exercise of all the children in the community and their location and circumstances, e.g., identify all youth clubs, children's homes, residential institutions, detention centres, refugee centres, or special schools, centres or services for children with disabilities.
- Collaborate with local NGOs who are working with marginalized groups of children in the community to forge links with these groups.
- Set up meetings with the managers of all settings for children to raise awareness about children's participation rights and to engage their support in fostering opportunities.
- Produce and disseminate information for parents and children about the child participation initiatives in child-friendly language and in all local languages spoken.
- Use local media and social media platforms to promote interest in the child and youth council and the commitment to reaching out to all sections of the community.

## 7.2 Engaging marginalized children

Once it is understood which children live within the community and where they are, the next challenge is to reach out to them and encourage them to feel that their views are important and need to be heard. They need to be encouraged to see the child and youth council as a mechanism that is relevant, welcoming and of interest to them.

### Action could include:

#### *a) Communicating the opportunities for participation*

- Visit the places where children are living and talk with them about the child and youth council, its role and how they could contribute.
- Involve members of school and child and youth council in these visits.
- Hold focus groups with children from different communities to explore their views on participation, the barriers they experience and how to overcome them.
- Produce photos, videos, etc., to demonstrate visually how the child and youth council works.
- Provide time and space for children to ask questions and air concerns about how it all works.

#### *b) Creating mechanisms to encourage participation*

- Hold elections in local youth centres attended by children from different communities.
- Ask the children what issues they feel need to be addressed in the community and encourage them to see the child and youth council as a place where such issues can be raised.
- Offer to allow children to come and sit as observers to see the child and youth council in action.
- Offer the possibility of joining on a provisional basis and emphasise the voluntary nature of participation – they can choose to leave at any time.

- Review any council policies that might restrict certain groups of children from joining, e.g., a requirement that a child is registered in school, lived in the area for a given period, or has a fixed address.
- Discuss with current members of the child and youth council whether to introduce a quota system to ensure that a given number of positions on the child and youth council are dedicated to certain groups.
- Consider the introduction of an open-ended recruitment, available for new members all year around, instead of at a fixed time each year.
- Meet with parents to encourage them to allow their child to participate.
- Create different approaches, including informal opportunities, for enabling children to participate. Strengthen ties between formal participation mechanisms, such as councils, and more informal ones.

**Examples:  
Different approaches  
to stimulating  
interest among more  
marginalized children**

In Regensburg (Germany), it is recognized that diversity comes from having a range of different participation opportunities, not just the council. The city has invested in creating low-threshold opportunities, such as going to the different districts of the city together with network partners who have direct contact with children from the area:

*In other words, we work together with institutions, schools and professionals who know the children and work with them. That means with the staff of the youth center, where the audience is, be it in the schools themselves, where the children are, that we go there, where the children are.*

In working with children from different backgrounds, one of them adds:

*We only have pedagogically trained specialists, and we always specifically make sure that children who have a harder time verbalizing themselves also get a chance to speak.*

Young people in Akureyri (Iceland) see communication and awareness raising as key to addressing diversity. One member explains:

*If only blonde girls like us are saying that we want everyone to be a part of this, it is hard for them to believe that because we all look the same. I think some minority groups feel like they are not welcome here, that this is not something for them. But we need to promote it better so everyone knows of the youth council and its role.*

Carbajosa de la Sagrada (Spain) has taken a range of specific steps to promote inclusion, including:

- Training of pedagogues specialised in guidance and special education.
- Support from the city council in hiring and resources that may be necessary, such as a sign interpreter for plenary sessions, or increasing the ratio of facilitators when children with disabilities participate.
- Support from schools in flexibility and adaptation of timetables, elimination of architectural barriers
- Pictograms were added in the municipality after a participatory process together with people with disabilities (municipal buildings, in the three schools and in other spaces decided by children and young people).

## 7.3 Removing the barriers

In order to create a genuinely inclusive environment within the child and youth council, it is essential to identify all the barriers that serve to exclude children from being able to participate on an equal basis with others once they are members. The barriers can be related to attitudes, the environment, poverty, access to transport, communication, and language. In addition, for children who have a long history of experiencing discrimination and exclusion, it is important not to rely on the absence of obvious excluding factors. It is necessary to reach out and overtly welcome and include them.

### **Actions to consider include:**

#### *a) Remove the accessibility barriers*

- Make sure the meetings are held at times and in places where it is safe for all children to attend.
- Always hold meetings in places that are physically accessible to all children.
- Think about the transport available to children, its cost and availability and what support can be provided, where necessary.
- Consider the options of holding meetings both on and offline. If online meetings are being held, ensure that all children have the necessary devices and access to Wi-Fi or data to be able to participate. Consider the creation of a budget to ensure that all children have the necessary equipment.
- Where children do not speak the local language, ensure that there are interpreters available and that these children are afforded the time and space to contribute on an equal basis with others.
- Think about the activities children are engaged in and how to facilitate the inclusion of children with different disabilities.
- Consider the possibility of sub-groups of members in different contexts, e.g., if there is a residential centre in the locality, encouraging them to connect with the child and youth council, for example, via Zoom.

#### *b) Promote confidence*

- Allow all children to attend the meetings, even if they are not formal members, as this can encourage them to see how it all works, and to build confidence in the process.
- Involve local NGOs to provide support and expertise on how to involve children from different communities effectively.
- Engage with parents to ensure that they know about the work of the child and youth council and can support their children as members.
- Work with parents to provide them with information to reassure and encourage them to give consent where they are expressing concerns
- Explore the idea of a 'buddy' system for children who are more isolated or vulnerable to be paired up with a peer.
- Ensure that where children drop out, there is follow-up with them to explore the reasons and work with them to find solutions.

*c) Encourage inclusive attitudes and practice*

- Provide training for all the members of the council on inclusion, non-discrimination and feeling safe. Work with them to create a core set of ground rules for ensuring that everyone feels included.
- Provide training for adult support workers and facilitators on inclusive and participatory practices.
- Ensure that all communications about the child and youth council highlight the representation of different groups of children.
- Develop a system of monitoring and evaluating the experiences of all children in the child and youth council in order to find out how inclusive the environment is and where changes need to be made. It may be necessary to enable children to contribute confidentially if they are anxious about being criticized publicly.
- Develop, with the members of the child and youth council, a 'complaints mechanism' that enables children who feel they are not being listened to, are being discriminated against or are marginalized, to get help in resolving the problem.
- Introduce sub-groups to ensure the engagement of children with different aptitudes and interests – not all children enjoy more formal meetings but may be able to contribute on more creative projects or communications.

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**Examples:  
Multiple approaches  
to removing the  
barriers**

Young people from Jyväskylä (Finland) had a range of suggestions to overcome the lack of diversity of membership within the youth council, including:

- Provide more resources and open more slots in the youth council to expand membership and increase the opportunities for different groups of children.
- Support schools in making sure the selection process is more democratic so that children from different backgrounds would participate.
- Think creatively about including children whose first language is not Finnish — simplify council documents to make them more accessible for all children and publish documents in all key languages spoken in the community. For example, when the city communicated about COVID-19 only in Finnish, the youth council sent a query on why the information was not available in other languages. A couple of days later, the city published information also in other languages.
- Improve the visibility and democratic nature of youth representation.
- Raise awareness about the work of the youth council to all children and young people.
- Give more prominence to the voices of migrant young people.
- Seek more initiative and proactive support from adults.

Some action had already been taken to strengthen the diversity of the youth council so that sexual and gender minorities, young people with mental health challenges and migrant children and young people were included. Examples given included:

- Children living in care had participated in the youth council, which has required close collaboration with their placement units to make sure they are safe when they participate.
- A young person with a visual impairment and cerebral palsy had also participated for several years, which made the group reconsider its ways of working – the young person had for example suggested that meeting agendas would be shared in a bigger font. It was very important for him/her to also participate in the Disability Council as a representative of the Youth council.

In Kufstein (Austria), concerns were highlighted that the youth council is not approachable to all young people. In other words, its activities are fairly demanding. One person observed: *What is already noticeable is that the youth council is very high-threshold. In our cooperation with the youth centre, we have noticed that many young people who can only just keep to the low-threshold nature of the youth centre find it difficult to get into the meeting structure. It is also difficult for young people at vocational school, who are often tied up in the afternoon. That's when students have more of an opportunity to get involved. We have young people from apprenticeships and high schools. We also have a lot of girls with a migration background. As far as that is concerned, we are very diverse. But I think we lose a lot of people because it's too high-threshold. For many people, simply going to the municipality and sitting down in a meeting room is more of an effort than going to a youth centre or a park, unfortunately.*

The council in Avilés (Spain) is open to any child who wants to be included. It is always open to the whole number of boys and girls from each centre. There is no need to limit it by year or age. Meetings are held in all districts of the city to facilitate participation. The council has worked with a special education institution to make it more inclusive. As the participation is open for everyone, they feel there are children from all backgrounds. However, they recognize that COVID-19 and working online has been a hindrance for inclusion. The council has worked with specialized agencies or entities to reach some of the vulnerable groups, including:

- Virgen de las Mareas Centre, with Roma children and adolescents: recognizing the difficulties they faced in attending the meetings, they go to the centre together opinions there. They even come up with proposals to present at the meeting and then work on them.
- San Cristóbal Special Education School: again, the children are able to come to the centre where regular meetings are held and, in addition, they hold special sessions at the centre, so that all children and adolescents can attend and participate.
- Social protection centres: since 2010, the council has collaborated with social protection services. Social protection services often consider the council as a resource to refer children to.

The only time a readjustment had to be made was with a child from the special education school who got very upset if there were too many people. In this case, there was an extra day of meetings to accommodate him in smaller groups of 5-6 people and to work by commissions. Overall, the inclusive approach was positive: friendly spaces, good atmosphere, lots of play, listening, looking, creating and each child being able to contribute what he or she considers important.



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## 8. Impact monitoring and evaluation of child participation

Children and young people need to be able to measure if their involvement in a school or youth council has made a difference – either to themselves as individuals, or to projects, initiatives, or policies that they have been supporting. Both children and involved adults need to know what works and why. Monitoring and evaluating outcomes is, therefore, necessary in order to:

- Assess what activities or actions have and have not been effective.
- Identify what needs to change if they are to become more effective.
- Provide evidence to the school and council of the benefits of participation.
- Encourage other children and young people to get involved.
- Hold the municipality and school accountable on their commitments to children.

**Example:  
Challenges in  
monitoring and  
evaluation**

Overall, the investment in monitoring and evaluation tends to be weaker than in other aspects of a commitment to child participation. The reasons vary, but include:

- The frequency and speed with which children and young people move on from activities renders it hard to capture longitudinal data.
- Lack of expertise and knowledge in how to monitor and evaluate amongst supporting adults.
- Lack of tools available for undertaking monitoring and evaluation at the local level.
- Reluctance to undertake surveys and questionnaires, as schools receive them all the time from different stakeholders – and the local government is not always aware of what data collection efforts are taking place by other stakeholders.

## 8.1 A child rights-based approach to monitoring and evaluation

Both the objectives and the process of monitoring need to comply with a child rights-based approach. Accordingly, it is important to consider the four general principles as a guide to the process. For example, if the goal of a child and youth council was to make the streets safer for children to go out within a particular local community without fear of harassment or harm, monitoring and evaluating progress with a child rights-based approach would require:

- **Article 2, non-discrimination:** Data needs to be disaggregated to identify whether different groups of children had experienced comparable improvements in their safety, depending on, for example, where they lived, or whether they were girls or boys, LGBTQI young people, children from different ethnic communities, or children with disabilities. This data is essential in order to evaluate progress towards meeting the goal and where to target further action to achieve more progress.
- **Article 3, best interests:** It is important that any measures to make the streets safer were not achieved by compromising children's other rights, for example, by discouraging those more at risk to stay at home or go out less. Doing so would not be in children's overall best interests.
- **Article 6, maximum development:** Over time, it would be valuable to monitor the impact of greater commitment to safety on children's overall sense of well-being and positivity about their local community.
- **Article 12, participation:** Any process of monitoring and evaluation must always involve children directly – in the development of the initial goals, the determination of the indicators, the collection of data, as researchers and respondents, in the analysis of the findings and in any reflections on next steps and how to improve their participation.

## 8.2 What needs to be monitored and evaluated

If monitoring and evaluating is to be done thoroughly, it is important to examine three aspects of the participation process and to develop indicators to assess progress in respect of:

→ Outcomes

→ Outputs

→ Inputs

### *a) Outcome indicators*

UNICEF, in its Conceptual Framework for Adolescent Participation, has identified four key areas of outcomes for children's participation.<sup>1</sup> The importance attached to these outcome indicators emerges strongly through, and are affirmed by the survey data for this study. They are:

→ *A sense of self, self-esteem, self-worth, and efficacy*, which indicate confidence, aspiration to goals, and the ability to challenge rights violations.

→ *Being taken seriously*, which is interpreted as the perception of respect and encouragement to participate, as well as a sense of relevance and connection with the child's day to day experiences, that prompts them to participate in meaningful ways.

→ *Making decisions* on issues that are relevant to them and which they feel they should have the opportunity to be involved in. It reflects the degree to which children feel that they are involved and have power over decisions and matters that affect their lives.

→ *Public and civic engagement* which measures the extent to which children have actually been able to influence decisions in the school, public and civic sphere, and is relevant to their sense of influence, their sense of social justice, and their civic knowledge.

These outcome indicators capture the process and experience of children's participation as well as the changes that have arisen as a consequence of that participation. In any particular school or child and youth council, these outcome indicators will need to be defined more specifically. For example, if a school council were committed to working with the staff and other students on developing a new anti-bullying strategy, the outcomes might be defined in terms of how genuinely the children's views were listened to, the extent to which they were able to shape the process, their satisfaction with the eventual policy, and how effectively it was being implemented. Children and other stakeholders can also use the nine basic requirements to monitor and evaluate the quality of the participation process.

**Examples:  
The positive impact of participation**

Young people in Cascais (Portugal) highlighted the personal impact of participation: developing team-working and participation skills, feeling of community, benefit when applying for further studies, friendships, critical thinking, sense of self-worth and autonomy. And adults pointed out that participation also has positive impacts on the class environment:

We know of classes where there are some new foreign students, who are often bullied or not integrated into the class. And these foreign students, when they realize that they can have a role there, they get excited, they play a role, and it is with this role that they manage to integrate in the class.

In Stuttgart (Germany) a student says:

*Before I was in the youth council, I could not talk, I was so shy, I couldn't even say thank you at the butcher's when you got a piece of meat sausage as a gift. In the meantime, I'm now a local politician, even in the big ones. It was now my first local election in March. I got the third most votes of all in the city council. So, this is also a stepping stone.*

**Examples:  
Seeing concrete evidence of outcomes from participation**

During the COVID pandemic, the youth council in Kufstein (Austria) became concerned that it was increasingly difficult to comply with the mask obligation on the bus as they went to school – students were losing or forgetting them. Accordingly, they contacted the bus operator and asked whether it would be possible to distribute masks for young people directly at the bus, so that the bus driver had a regular supply and could also give children one if needed. This request was met by the bus operator, with the request not to make this public, otherwise they would have become “fixed mask providers” and that they would only share the information with other young people. This was only on a very small level but it showed that the young people care for each other and try to make their lives easier.

The work of the Lappeenranta (Finland) youth council at the municipal level on participation has led to the regional health services contacting the team to learn about digital youth engagement work and interaction with young people on social media platforms. In this way, the work becomes a ‘demonstration model’ for other agencies. The council has also had an important personal impact on the members. They mention that the council has taught them self-confidence, teamwork and collaboration skills, creativity, argumentation skills, media skills, and also collaboration and working with adults.

In Eville (Germany), the youth council has been successful in influencing:

- Working with local Fridays for Future activists to introduce waste recycling options across waste bins in the city
- Ban of parents' taxis in front of the school in the city centre

Currently, the council is advocating for a youth ticket for public transport across the whole region of Hessen. The council members also wish to continue working to make biking to school safer.

### *b) Output indicators*

Output indicators measure the quantity and/or the quality of performance or achievement that occurred because of the activity or services provided. For example, output indicators could include:

- The number of schools with established democratic school councils.
- The number of times the child and youth council has met over the past 12 months.
- The number of times the child and youth council has met with the council leaders in the past 12 months.
- The per cent of teachers who received training in child participation.
- Per cent of children in the community who received information about the work of the child and youth council.

Wherever relevant, this data should be disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity, urban-rural, disability, care status, income, and other key diversity factors.

### *c) Input indicators*

Input indicators refer to the resources, systems, and structures needed to implement an activity or intervention such as human, financial, or material resources, policies, or strategies. They measure the extent to which the school or municipality has invested in creating the necessary environment and capacity for children's participation to take place. For example, this might include:

- A policy for every school to establish a school council.
- A policy to establish a child and youth council.
- Incorporation of children's participation as a core dimension of the CFCI.
- Allocation of staff and a budget to support child and youth councils.
- Development of a training curriculum for staff on introducing child participation forums.

## Steps to be taken in monitoring and evaluation

Actions to consider in strengthening an approach to monitoring and evaluating children's participation in the work of child and youth councils might involve the following process:

- **Step One:** Work with the council members to decide on the goals or desired outcomes of a particular initiative or over a given period. For example, the goal might be, to raise the profile of the child and youth council among children in the community, or to persuade the municipality to build an additional playground, to introduce a policy on respect of sexual harassment of girls, or to commit schools to invest in improving the state of the toilets.
- **Step Two:** Decide what indicators would enable the children to determine whether the goal had been achieved. This might include outcome, output, and input indicators.
- **Step Three:** Gather data on what has happened. The type of data will depend on the goal and associated indicators. For example, in the case of a new policy, the documentation of that policy will be the data that is needed. Then suppose the goal was to raise awareness and understanding. In that case, it might be necessary to undertake a survey or focus groups to get feedback on any changes in attitudes or knowledge.
- **Step Four:** Evaluate the findings. Analysis of the results of the findings will allow both the local government and the child and youth council to assess whether the goals have been achieved and what activities were or were not effective in contributing to that achievement.

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## Examples: monitoring and evaluation processes

In Guyancourt (France), children publish a 'journal' at the end of their term describing all actions they have taken, which allows them to present their impact to others.

In Cascais (Portugal), the municipality collects questionnaires at every stage of the process from children and teachers. Based on this data, the project is continuously improved, and suggestions for improvements are always shared with the new cohort of participants for their feedback.

In Regensburg (Germany), the city regularly monitors its participation mechanisms through the monitoring of its CFCI action plan, where a great deal of effort goes to looking at what has been achieved and with what results. There is also ongoing quality monitoring of the work, and follow-up on the proposals made by children and young people. However, the adults recognize that at times it is difficult to assess which of the results can be attributed to the direct impact of the Advisory Council. One year after the election of the new Youth Advisory Council, there is a reflection session to assess the council's goals and ideas together with the children. This also includes reflection on the school simulation games together with school administration, including questionnaires and interviews.

In 2009 in Jyväskylä (Finland), when three smaller municipalities were annexed to Jyväskylä, the model for the youth council was co-created with children. This represented a collaborative approach in which the systems are constantly evaluated and adapted together with young people. Young people's engagement in the process is key to making sure they feel ownership of the process. Every autumn, the youth council reviews its rules and code of conduct and decides whether to make changes.

In Avilés (Spain), within the council's own meetings, organic and not-so-structured evaluations are carried out quite often. They evaluate as they close projects, and at the end of the course, they make a complete evaluation of the course and the course's developed trajectory. The monitoring and technical committees carry out continuous evaluations. An official and formal evaluation of children's plan is also carried out together with the educational centres, municipal departments, associations, and children and adolescents, to see how it worked, what to improve and to design the next one.

In the Palomeras Bajas (Spain) primary school, evaluations are made in assemblies, of activities, excursions, etc., on a quarterly basis. In the work plan, self-evaluations are done also on a quarterly basis. Children also evaluate the teachers. In addition, they have a study plan, where they review jointly individual and group commitments and the fulfilment of these commitments.

In Fuenlabrada (Spain), the city does not measure the actual impact of children's participation. However, it does measure the quality of children's experience. At the end of each legislature, an evaluation is undertaken with children on how they felt about participating in the council.

In Carbajosa de la Sagrada (Spain), at the end of the school year, a survey is carried out in the schools and at the "Animation club" to evaluate the process and plan the following year. Teachers and the management team also answer a satisfaction survey.

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# Annex I.

## Methodology for the survey

The following steps inform the development of the study:

**Phase I: Scoping:** Interviews with UNICEF specialists working on the Child Friendly Cities Initiative and child participation locally to map existing child participation practices, challenges, and lessons learned.

**Phase II: Selection of participating cities:** Participating towns and communities of different sizes were selected based on the extent to which their child and youth participation mechanisms were considered:

- Effective and influential
- Democratic and representative
- Inclusive

**Phase III: Development of semi-structured interview questionnaire:** A survey questionnaire was developed by a Child Participation Expert Group, consisting of UNICEF staff working with local governments and child participation, in consultation with the University of Barcelona. Using the organization's safeguarding focal points, the survey was reviewed. In addition, an independent ethical review committee reviewed the survey questions. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information addressing, for example:

- Different models of child and youth council
- Election and selection processes
- Quality of children's experiences within child and youth councils
- Relationships with the municipality
- Quality and nature of adult support
- Impact of participation both on participating children and on their communities
- Measuring outcomes

**Phase IV: Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in cities and communities in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, South Korea, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain and involved:

- Adults supporting municipal child and youth councils
- Groups of children participating in municipal and school-based child and youth councils

**Phase V: Analysis of interview data and development of the study report:** We performed an analysis of the findings of the interviews and focus group discussions by extrapolating the lessons learned by the participants. The findings were compiled into this report to provide examples of best practices and practical measures for strengthening effective, representative, and inclusive participation.

# Annex II.

## Summary of implications of each level of participation

Impact	Consultative	Collaborative	Child-led
Enables the voices of significant numbers of children to contribute their views	Yes – e.g., an online survey can reach out to thousands of children	No – only involves a limited number of children and requires significant adult commitment. However, for example, children can collaborate with adults in the development of a survey, which is then used to consult with a wider constituency of children	Yes – if the initiative reaches out to children' online, for example, in a campaign or movement led by children and young people
Can be done as a one-off activity	Yes	No	No
Can be designed in ways that allow for very young children to express views	Yes	Yes	No
Allows for individual children to influence decisions made by adults that affect them directly, for example, medical treatments, decisions made by the courts in family proceedings	Yes	Yes	N/A
Recognises the importance of children's perspectives informing, for example, research findings, policy, legislative reform	Yes	Yes	Yes
Affirms to children that their views matter and are taken seriously	Yes	Yes	Yes
Creates opportunities for children to work in partnership with adults.	No	Yes – Inter-generational collaboration allows for new ways of engaging and working together, challenging traditional power relationships.	Yes – with adults facilitating rather than leading or managing the process.
Allows children to contribute to the development and shape of an initiative, mechanism or process	No	Yes	Yes
Can result in outcomes that more directly reflect children's priorities	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provides opportunities for children to take responsibility	No	Yes	Yes

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Consultative</b>	<b>Collaborative</b>	<b>Child-led</b>
Offers opportunities for children to acquire confidence, skills and build self esteem	No	Yes	Yes
Children are in control of their own agendas and preferred ways of working	No	Partially	Yes
Children feel empowered by being able to influence or make decisions for themselves	No	Yes	Yes
Provides strong and positive messages about children's capacities and the value of their contribution – challenges assumptions about lack of added value in listening to children	Partially	Yes	Yes

Note: Initiatives can move through different levels over time, and a school or child and youth council can engage in activities that utilize all three different levels



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