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CHILD CONSULTATIONS ON COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Concept note

This concept note explores the possibility of undertaking consultative participation of children to inform the development of a non-binding instrument on comprehensive sexuality education, on the basis of a feasibility study prepared by the ENF-VAE working group.

Members of the ENF-VAE working group discussed and approved the proposed way forward during their 3rd meeting on 11-12 March 2024.

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1. BACKGROUND AND RESOURCES ON CHILD CONSULTATIONS

Child participation is a key strategic objective in the promotion of children's rights as well as a cross-cutting approach that is mainstreamed into the Organisation's standard-setting, monitoring and cooperation work.

The Council of Europe Children's Rights Division (CRD) has been committed for a number of years to involving children in its work. Children have been consulted on topics such as [sexual violence](#), [migration](#), [child-friendly healthcare](#), or on the [Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#). The CRD has also invited children to its major events, for their concrete input, and reached out to them in the production of child-friendly materials, for example for Roma and Traveller children, or for children in the digital environment.

The Organisation will continue to consult children on its activities, as far as possible, where particularly relevant and in line with:

- International and European standards respecting children's right to have their views heard and taken into consideration on matters that affect them, including on the basis of article 12 of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).
- Council of Europe [Recommendation CM/Rec \(2012\)2 on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18](#), stipulating the right of children to participate, and encourages child participation in the activities of the Council of Europe.
- The [Child Participation Assessment Tool](#) (2016) providing 10 specific and measurable indicators to assess progress in implementing the Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18.
- The [Handbook on children's participation "Listen – Act – Change"](#) for professionals working for and with children (2021).
- Priority area 5 on "giving a voice to every child" of the [Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022-2027\)](#)

2. FOCUS OF THE CONSULTATION

As part of its implementation of Priority Area 1 of the *Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021)* to achieve "freedom from violence for all children", the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF) through its Committee of Experts on the Prevention of Violence (ENF-VAE) is entrusted with the elaboration of developing a draft instrument on age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education to strengthen responses for inter alia preventing and combatting violence against children, including sexual violence and harmful or risky behaviour.

A feasibility study is being drafted as a basis to reflect on the opportunity to draft a non-binding instrument on comprehensive sexuality education. In addition, the "Study on Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses", Prepared by: Professor Simon Hackett, Durham University, United Kingdom will feed in the reflections and the elaboration of the deliverables of the ENF VAE.

This concept note explores the possibility of the ENF-VAE launching the participation of children to inform the development of a non-binding instrument, on the basis of the elements identified in the feasibility study on comprehensive sexuality education.

In the current draft, the **proposed hallmarks** of a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum that best protects children from all forms of violence, including gender-based and sexual violence is one that:

- Includes accurate and evidence-based information that is adapted to the child's age and maturity
- Includes information and critical understanding of the biological, social, cultural, emotional and psychological aspects of sex, sexuality and relationships including content about healthy, responsible and respectful sexual and relationship behaviour, empathy and personal integrity
- Includes information on and critical understanding of gender equality including on girls' equality and equality for children with diverse SOGIESC
- includes information on and critical understanding of personal and bodily autonomy and integrity, the concept of consent and relevant laws around the age of consent to sexual activity and prohibitions on all forms of violence including gender-based and sexual violence.
- equips children through active-skills based learning with the necessary competences to be able to recognise and respond to harmful sexual behaviour, whether engaged in by adults or peers and whether committed online or offline
- empowers children to prevent violence by:
 - developing their self-confidence and critical thinking to help them exercise their rights and act as responsible citizens now and as they transition into adulthood
 - encouraging them to report violence, whether experienced by themselves or others
 - informing them about the availability of child-friendly reporting procedures and how to access them
 - informing them about the full-range of support services, such as hotlines and helplines, available for those who have experienced violence.
- is mandatory.

Children could be invited to be consulted on the above proposed elements to be addressed in comprehensive sexuality education and give their views on how they should be further developed.

3. ROLES OF STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERS

- **Secretariat of the Children's Rights Division:**
 - The participatory process will be led by the Secretariat of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF).
 - The Secretariat will engage one or several international consultant(s) to coordinate the child participation in cooperation with national partners.
- **International Child participation consultant(s)**

- A call for experts will be launched to identify international consultant(s) responsible for the coordination, conceptualisation, methodology, of the child participation.
- The consultants should have general knowledge and experience in organising child consultation processes.
- The consultants will be requested to conceptualise and propose an appropriate methodology to follow when consulting children by means of communication technologies and advise participating national delegations in this respect.
- **National partners**
 - The national partners organise and implement the consultations with children in their respective countries, in line with the methodology provided, and transmit the outcomes back to the Council of Europe and to the children involved.
 - National partners can be both a state organisation or a civil society organisation including different government services and agencies, ombudspersons, NGOs.
 - It is suggested to organise child consultations in collaboration with 3 to 4 national partners.

4. THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

- **Well identified and inclusive groups of children**

The consultants will be entrusted to conceptualise a process that is as inclusive as possible, by encouraging:

- Formal involvement of 3 to 4 national delegations in a geographically balanced manner.
- Consultation of children of different age-groups, up to 18 years old.
- Forming balanced child consultation groups of around 10 children in each group:
 - ensuring gender balance
 - consulting children from different social, ethnic, religious or migrant background,
 - involving children with disabilities and in other vulnerable situations.
- If possible carrying out the consultation in partnership with schools, and reaching out to pupils engaged in non-formal education.

- **Semi-structured and child-friendly questions**

- The consultation of children will be based on semi-structured questions.
- The questions will be drafted and presented in a child-friendly manner.
- The questions will be open enough for children to add their own perspective and to propose more specific items.
- Children should preferably be addressed in their mother tongue in one-to-one interviews or small workshops, including through anonymous, written replies, respecting the sensitivity and intimacy of the topic.

- **Establishing trust and respecting child privacy**

- Consultations must take place in an established relationship of trust and respect.
- The CRD's [Child Safeguarding Policy](#) should apply to all consultative activities (in-person or virtual).

- The facilitator must have the skills and time to explain the process to the child, including the fact that children’s participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time.
- No identifying information about the child should be made public without the necessary consents.

5. NEXT STEPS

- The present concept note was presented during the meeting of ENF-VAE working group on 11-12 March 2024 and supported by the group who agreed to launch the consultation process.
- The consultation process could be launched in 2024 and run until mid-2025.
- The results of the different consultations will be compiled and analysed by the international consultant, who will draft a report by the end of 2024.
- The draft report will be circulated to the members of ENF-VAE and CDENF and will feed in the drafting of the non-binding instrument on comprehensive sexuality education.
- Findings of the consultations could be presented during the CDENF meeting and mid-term review of the Strategy Conference on 3-4 April 2025.
- Written or online feedback will be given to children and national delegations about what suggestions coming from the children were included into the non-binding instrument on comprehensive sexuality education at the end of the process.

6. WORK PROGRAMME ENVISAGED

Phase of the child participation process	Partners	When
Preparatory phase		
Conceptualising and making preparations for the child consultation process Identifying member states who have an interest in supporting the child consultations	Secretariat (of the Council of Europe Children’s Rights Division)	April – June 2024
Selecting an international consultant to support the process at European and national levels, including through direct contacts with the national delegations Drafting the methodology and formulating semi-open questions to be submitted to the children and dispatching the priority areas identified amongst participating national delegations Selecting the participating national delegations Sharing the Council of Europe toolkit and methodology on child participation with national partners	Secretariat Supporting consultant	July – September 2024
Implementation phase		
Preparing for and actually running meetings with diverse groups of children in different countries and on the identified priority areas <i>Proposal:</i> 1 thematic meeting per participating country, involving 10-20 children and youth of various backgrounds and belonging to the age group 10-25	Secretariat Supporting consultant National governments and their partners	September 2024– December 2024

Phase of the child participation process	Partners	When
Update on the process to the meetings of ENF-VAE and/or CDENF	Supporting consultant	September – December 2024
Reporting phase		
Preparing reports on the child participation meetings held at the national level	National governments and their partners Supporting consultant	January – February 2025
Presenting the preliminary findings of the consultation at the mid-term review of the Strategy	National governments and their partners Supporting consultant	3-4 April 2025
Drawing conclusions from the overall process for any suggestions still to be included into the Recommendation	Secretariat Supporting consultant CDENF Bureau	By July 2025
Input / participation in the drafting of the Recommendation	Supporting consultant Secretariat	Autumn 2025
Written or online feedback to children and national delegations about what suggestions coming from the children were included into the new Strategy	Secretariat National governments and their partners	By end 2025