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High-level international conference on “Progress towards meaningful child participation at all levels – a multi-stakeholder dialogue”

Summary report

“Adults aren’t always aware that we are the future of the world. We also have our opinions, and those opinions might change the world for the best”

[Izabela-Lara, 14 years old from Slovenia]

I. Background

The European Commission and Council of Europe joint project [CP4Europe – Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe](#) provided for an excellent avenue to host a dynamic exchange about child participation in decision-making. The project is implemented over 24 months (01 April – 31 March 2023) by the Council of Europe in collaboration with five country partners – the Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Portugal and Slovenia - that are currently in the process of improving child participation in decision making at national and local level, through a set of Council of Europe tools, including the [Child Participation Assessment Tool](#) and the [Handbook on children’s participation for professionals](#).¹

The Council of Europe work and long-standing experience in the area of child participation, that can be traced back to 2006, has revealed that one of the main barriers to systematically implement child participation in decision making is the lack of support from political leaders, senior managers in administrations and in general the higher hierarchy. Children are still not taken seriously by many adults who have the power to influence their lives.

On 21 October 2021, the first high-level international conference on “Progress towards meaningful child participation at all levels – a multi-stakeholder dialogue” was organised to precisely tackle the issue of high-level representatives’ engagement. It aimed at shedding light on the different perspectives, challenges and opportunities characterising child participation at different levels of government and in different layers of our democracies. The international conference contributed to ensuring that child participation remains at the top of European and national agendas while fostering efficient co-operation between different institutional actors.

¹ For further information on other CoE tools and activities on child participation, please find a comprehensive list with the relevant links [here](#)

II. Main features of the conference

The event's ambitious agenda aimed to create momentum for child participation and to foster a multi-stakeholder dialogue between European institutions, national authorities and children. Through such collaboration the conference intended to: (1) establish stronger links between the work carried out at the European and the national and local levels to respond to children's challenges to be heard and to have their opinions respected, (2) create an avenue for child participation in a high-level environment and practice mutual learning between adults and children, (3) share good practices and lessons learnt on which to build new successes, and to replicate them at European level². The number of attendees hit **114 participants** almost throughout the whole event.

The event was co-moderated by the Council of Europe independent expert, Luis Manuel Pinto, and the Senior Project Officer for the CP4Europe project, Marine Braun. It involved the contribution of distinguished speakers, including the Council of Europe Director General of the Directorate General of Democracy (DGII), Snežana Samardžić-Marković, the Head of the Children's Rights Division of the Council of Europe, Regina Jensdottir, a representative of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Baroness Doreen Massey, UNICEF Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, Afshan Khan, the Coordinator for the Rights of the Child of the European Commission, Valeria Setti, the president of Eurochild, Marie-Louise Coleiro-Preca, the Minister of Labour, family, Social and Equal Opportunities of Slovenia, Janez Cigler Kralj, the Deputy Minister for Family Affairs, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic, along with representatives of national institutions and ombudspersons for children from Portugal, Finland and Iceland.

One of the features that made the conference particularly appreciated by the attendees was the active participation of **9 young people aged between 12 and 18** from Portugal, Slovenia, Iceland, Finland and Estonia. Prior to the conference they had participated to one or two meetings with the moderators to get acquainted and discuss the content of their intervention, and this initiative received very positive feedback from the children themselves. They were involved at different stages of the event in several roles, as speakers, co-speakers, commentators and interviewees. Their contribution enabled decision-makers to identify and better draw the path ahead together with children, who represent the ultimate beneficiaries of their projects and programmes.

III. Mapping out the importance and impact of child participation in decision-making

The children argued that child participation is important to them because it raises their confidence and capability of speaking to an audience and to adults. In general, it helps to **improve communication with others by sharing ideas and coming up with solutions**, beside creating new opportunities for them on both a personal and professional level. In this way, children are educated and helped since an early age to voice their views and to feel comfortable to speak in public. The more children are accustomed to being consulted, the more they will take it seriously, contrary to what many adults think.

Child participation is, however, not only important to children. Rather, it is **important for democracy and for the whole world's societies**. Children and young people bring different points of view when it comes to decision making, especially on issues that concern them. Children who are engaged in such activities can become role models for others, giving life to an increasingly wide **intergenerational**

² To see the full programme of the event please click [here](#).

network which aims at strengthening existing democratic values. For example, being involved in conferences, international summits and workshops brings together eager young people and adults who are all reflecting together on how to reach a certain goal. This kind of collaboration gives the best results.

Many of the participating children felt that their opinions are heard and respected, as they had the chance to have an impact on several matters that concerned them. They maintained that **without child participation many issues risk to be overlooked** and it can be dangerous as potentially leading to violations of their rights. However, they also noticed that not *all* children have such an opportunity.

Involving vulnerable children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds was pointed out as central. Indeed, without their views the picture cannot be complete. Participating children argued that **it is their duty to try to fight for the children who are seldom heard** and to encourage their participation. One possible way of doing so would be to include them into children's councils as much as possible and developing projects in which they are the 'experts' and can share their first-hand experience.

A lot of work has to be done on the **stigmatisation of vulnerable/disadvantaged children** to encourage them to speak up. The importance of involving children who are seldom heard in high-level international conferences was also emphasised as a means to widen their opportunities to participate and have an impact.

In order to facilitate the participation of children in decision making processes, **adults need to start actually listening to the children, talk at their level in a child-friendly way** so that they do not feel so intimidated to voice their views. In this way, primary school children would also have the chance to express their opinions on matters that concern them and could be included too.

“The most urgent thing to do is to start accepting everything as normal and to adopt ‘different’ as ‘good’”

IV. Main challenges and current responses at different levels of governance

a) Challenges

In the last decade, much progress has been made in promoting and implementing child participation at both European and national level. However, a lot of work remains to be done. The different actors contributing to the event mentioned several structural and practical challenges that need to be addressed in order to systematically entrench the practice of child participation in member states' political, social and economic frameworks.

At the European level, it was observed that **only in 4 states out of 27 the consultation of children is legally mandatory** in the process of drafting a new policy or law³. In practice, many other states have child participation mechanisms in place, and do involve children in public decision-making processes, but they tend not to be consistent. While these efforts are to be commended, improved and strengthened, it was noticed that there is a **lack of homogeneity in the type of mechanisms used by states**. In this regard, child participation mechanisms in European countries tend not to really work

³ European Commission, "Study on child participation in EU political democratic life", April 2022. Available [here](#).

with one another, preventing good inter-country cooperation and quality/quantity data collection at the regional level. They are neither connected among them nor with European institutions.

At the national level, children's voices are reported as being **seldom meaningfully integrated in decision-making processes** and they are often **ineffective**. Children are still perceived by many adults as "only children", rather than full members of society and right holders. Sometimes, child participation is carried out by national institutions and organisations only to 'tick the box'. In many countries, it is reported as an unpleasant duty to hear children by institutions and professionals working for children. Children are just simply **not given the right means to participate** consistently and take part into the follow-up phase of the consultation. This issue points to the **absence of systemic mechanism for youth and children's participation** at national level. A **change of culture and mentality is needed** in the general population, as **trust is often denied to young people** and children for a question of prejudice. Law and methodological guidance is not enough. It is necessary to explore the basis and make it necessary for professionals and the public to know what children think and to strive for the actions accordingly.

"We really must ensure that children's participation is not only accepted but also internalised"

The main challenges according to children

Children argued that they often do not get the chance to participate because **many adults think that children are not interested in what surrounds them** and that they do not have an opinion on public decision-making matters. In this way, both the space and the opportunity for them to express their views is denied *a priori*. And even in those occasions in which children are given some space to participate, their contribution tends to be limited to **short interventions or performances** that are neither impactful nor satisfying for them. This leads to a **sense of frustration** and the realisation of the fact that recommendations are not carried out concretely. In many cases, it was also noticed that **adults emphasise the word 'children' or 'young person' unnecessarily** to discredit their views.

Child participation is also still too **dependent on inherent characteristics of children** themselves, such as age, ethnicity, background, disabilities and economic status. This results in disparities and in a sort of classification that denies equal opportunities to *all* children to participate. There are some children who are more likely to be involved in public debates than others. Indeed, **vulnerable children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds** both fall in the category of those who are 'seldom heard'. In addition, there seems to be an issue of **gender balance**, as girls are usually more involved or more willing to get involved in participatory activities compared to boys.

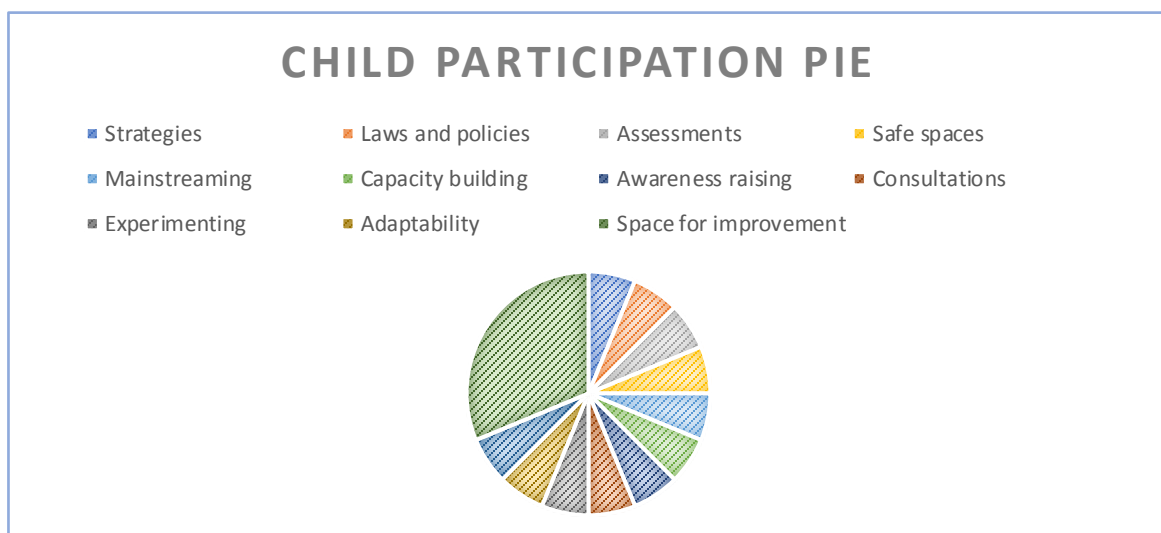
Children need to be bolder and remind adults of their existence and their opinions. It is currently too easy to ignore them and overlook their needs. An issue that was spotted in this context related to the fact **that not many people know about the children's participation mechanisms**. Moreover, the children raised the fact that sometimes they are **only occasionally involved** in decision-making, but this is not enough. They want to be involved on a daily-basis and express their views on any topic that affects them.

b) Good practices

At the international, European and local levels, organisations and member states are working to fulfil the obligation to promote, protect and fulfil the rights of the child, including the right to participate. Actions conducive to a full implementation of child participation are taken in different areas:

- **Strategies** - Producing strategies and action plans on how to improve the participation of children in decision making processes at the regional level;
- **Laws and policies** – With the help of international organisations, governments are getting support in protecting and implementing child participation through recommendations and policies;
- **Assessing child participation frameworks** – With the help of international organisation, governments are assisted in assessing and improving their child participation systems, frameworks and mechanisms;
- **Creating safe spaces for child participation** – both organisations and member states are increasingly providing for more fora and mechanisms for child participation both offline and online;
- **Mainstreaming child participation** – Encouraging colleagues working in other fields than the rights of the child, to produce child-friendly versions of documents and policies, so that children can have a say on matters at regional level too;
- **Capacity building** – Strengthening the knowledge and skills of professionals working with children.
- **Awareness raising** – Raise awareness among families, children, and communities as a whole, about children’s rights including child participation.
- **Inclusive child consultations** – Carrying out wide and inclusive child consultations on matters that affect them;
- **Experimenting different child participation participatory activities** – Children should not only be consulted, but also given the opportunity to co-create and collaborate with adults.
- **Adaptability** - Sign language and interpreters to facilitate everyone’s participation

But this is not enough. There is still a **major space for improvement**, as shown in the chart below (internally produced).



Children councils' activities and good practices

Children have mentioned several activities carried out in the framework of their school, municipality or national councils. They have been active in a variety of ways and on a variety of themes at all levels of government.

At international and European levels some of them were part of the EUROCHILD children's council and consulted regularly on several issues discussed in the European Parliament and Commission, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They **contributed to the drafting of both the EU and Council of Europe strategies for the rights of the child**, beside promoting the rights of the child in their national contexts as ambassadors.

When participating in conferences and events, **they made themselves the spokespersons of many children**, including vulnerable groups whom they consulted before to ensure their views had the same visibility as the ones of participating children.

At the national level, several children's councils have joined other European countries movements in demonstrating about important causes, such as climate change and water resources, and **set demands for governments** or **collecting signatures for referendums**.

They have also made their voices heard at local level with **protests** and **attention-grabbing interventions** against school closures during the pandemic, lobbying for better and accessible remote education for all.

V. The way forward

All actors, including children, brainstormed and proposed different ways of building on the current responses and good practices to fill the 'space for improvement' section shown in the *child participation pie* above.

At European level and national level, organisations and member states should create more safe spaces, meetings and **interactions that are relaxed and understandable for children**. In this way, children could take part to "adults' conversations" in an informed way and perform major roles in events and conferences, such as **moderating and designing activities**. It was also stressed the importance of taking advantage of the digital environment more, including through the use of **online platforms** through which children can participate and express their views on political and democratic matters. These platforms could be replicated to discuss any other relevant thematic that affects children's life and reach out to many more children than offline participatory activities.

Ensuring that **all schools have a children's council**, which gets regularly consulted and has a say in the organisation of both educational and recreational activities. These councils should ensure equal **representativeness** of children from different ages, backgrounds, ethnicity, economic or other status.

Children from countries where this is the case, have given very good feedback about these mechanisms and expressed satisfaction about their impact. In this context, children expressed their interest in being **more connected to children belonging to other children's councils** both in their country and abroad. This would enable them to exchange and discuss on issues of national, regional and international importance, beside sharing good practices.

It was emphasised the importance of **engaging younger children** as well as older ones. All children have something to say in matters that affect them. Pre-school and school periods play the most significant role in developing children's skills to participate and that it is why children need to be engaged since a young age. The importance of developing **child-friendly versions** of documents, policies and laws becomes even more central if younger children are to be consulted.

“Child participation means working together with children”

VI. Multi-thematic Q&A with children

In the last session of the conference, children were asked questions on different themes related to child participation, drawn both from the chat box and spontaneously asked by the moderators. The following is an extract of the dialogue that took place.

What is the role of parents and families in supporting child participation?

We should try to help those children whose parents are not supportive of child participation and do not let children speak. A solution would be for children who get the chance to participate to ask other children what they would like to bring up at local/national European level and carry their message with them.

Maria, 15 y.o. Portugal

A lot of parents decide everything for their children. Children should know that they have a right to express their opinions in their daily life and matters, no matter how simple or difficult.

Izabela Lara, 14 y.o., Slovenia

How do you think schools will benefit from European projects on child participation?

Schools would benefit because many children would like more to go to school. If schools listened to children, they would get a better response from children and teachers, because they would be able to work with them better.

Izabela Lara, 14 y.o., Slovenia

What opportunities to participate you have in your school experience?

Some schools are supportive, others do not believe that children should take part to decisions taken at national level because they think that is not their place. This upsets children who are motivated to contribute to society in a positive way and they value their chance to get involved very much. Through these participatory activities children also become better students by learning how to listen to other children and adults and cooperate with them to come up with solutions.

Maria, 15 y.o., Portugal

What is the relationship that children have with digital tools? What do you think is the potential of the digital environment to help child participation?

The right to information is definitely enhanced through digital tools. This can be both for learning or recreational purposes. Books are important tools but sometimes they are not comprehensive enough. Through the digital environment children can boost their knowledge.

Vanessa, 17 y.o., Portugal

Some schools give iPads to students to do their assignments, and this is better because they have other opportunities to learn.

Vilhàmur, 12 y.o., Iceland

Many children only know participation online because of the pandemic. This is the only way we can be all together, but we have to be aware of the dangers that the online world can bring.

Eva, 14 y.o., Portugal

Digital tools bring more opportunities than disadvantages, but there are some risks too. While on the one hand many children do not have digital skills, on the other hand, it can be a more inclusive way to conduct participatory activities. There are new platforms that young people can use to express their views on laws and policies (related to school, education or traffic).

Eetu, 15 y.o., Finland, Eurochild Children's Council

Interesting resources

The following is a compilation of useful resources on child participation both from the Council of Europe and from other organisations committed to this cause:

Resources shared during the event:

- UNICEF – [Young people in Europe and Central Asia share their views on inclusion](#)
- UNICEF – [U-Report](#)
- European Commission – [Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life](#)

Child Participation in times of COVID-19:

- IICRD, CPC Learning Network, UNICEF, IFRC – [Moving towards children as partners in child protection in COVID-19](#)
- Save the Children – [Tracker: Children’s participation during COVID-19](#)
- Global Protection Cluster – [Children’s voice: maintaining and adapting for safe child participation during COVID-19](#) (webinar, recording available)

CoE resources on child participation

- [Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec\(2012\)2 on participation of children and young people under the age of 18](#)
- [Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers on child-friendly health care](#) (2011)
- [Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice](#) (2010)
- [Recommendation Rec\(2010\)7 on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education](#)
- [Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool](#) (CPAT)
- [Council of Europe Implementation Guide for the Child Participation Assessment Tool](#)
- [Council of Europe Self-Assessment Tool for Youth Policy](#)
- [“Listen-Act-Change” - Handbook on children’s participation for professionals working for and with children](#)

CoE activities which have actively involved children

- Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027)
- [Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#) (2016-2021)
- [Mid-term evaluation report on the Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#) (2016-2021)
- [Barnahus Slovenia cooperation project](#)