



CP4Europe Webinar on “The theory and practice of involving vulnerable children in decision making”

9 December 2021 - online

SUMMARY REPORT

Background

The present webinar was organised in the framework of European Commission / Council of Europe [CP4Europe – Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe](#) with the aim of promoting the inclusion of vulnerable children in decision-making processes at all levels of governance. The decision to hold such event originated from the request of the CP4Europe country partners – Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Portugal, Slovenia – that are in the process of implementing the project and are looking for innovative and effective ways of mainstreaming inclusive child participation in their countries. The Council of Europe supported such efforts by identifying a pool of experts in child participation who put together the content of the present webinar.

The present report aims at giving a non-exhaustive overview of the content, challenges and lessons learnt that were presented during the webinar. For more information please visit our dedicated [webpage](#).

Main features of the webinar

The main aim of the webinar was to generally encourage Council of Europe member states to implement child participation of *all* children at all levels and to create momentum for child participation in Europe. In particular, the event also aimed at: 1) Promoting inclusive child participation by strengthening its implementation at national level to reach out to as many children as possible; 2) Assisting professionals working for and with children to take advantage of the existing practical tools, methodologies and tips; 3) Creating a platform to exchange good practices, tools and other useful resources to consult vulnerable children.¹ The event was attended by a variety of stakeholders and reached **80 participants**, which included the CP4Europe country partners, policymakers, representatives of national authorities and institutions, members of the academia, child participation experts, other professionals working for and with children including representatives of the civil society.

The event was moderated by Ms Marine Braun, Senior Project Officer at the Council of Europe Children’s Rights Division, who introduced each one of the knowledgeable speakers selected from the **CP4Europe experts pool** for their distinctive expertise in the area of the participation of vulnerable children. The experts’ presentations touched upon the crucial challenges and lessons learnt drawn from long-standing experience in engaging particular groups of vulnerable children. This method enabled the continuity of an exceptionally practical golden thread throughout the webinar, which linked the theory and practice of child participation with the provision of practical ready-to-use tools and methodologies.

¹ To see the full concept and programme please click [here](#).

Main challenges and safeguarding considerations

The first part of the event focused on providing a common ground to set all the attendees on the same page on the theory of child participation of vulnerable groups. The topics tackled in this section are: main challenges of involving vulnerable children in decision making, safeguarding issues, and child participation online.

I. Overcoming the challenges to ensure inclusive children's participation in public decision making – Ms Cath Larkins

The main challenges identified by different professionals working for and with children were outlined, constituting the product of the work and cooperation with other experts in the last 30 years. In this way, everyone can build on these challenges and the solutions rather than starting from scratch. The 11 challenges included:

- Stigma, structural discrimination and marginalization;
- Building trusting relationships;
- Accessible information/language;
- Creating enabling environments;
- Timescales that enable children in vulnerable situation to take a lead;
- Securing appropriate consent;
- Raising awareness of discrimination and of rights;
- Effective, credible and creative methods;
- Transparency about meaning, limits, and opportunities of participation;
- Evaluating over longer timescales;
- Lack of investment in participation responding to the pandemic;

When answering the question:

“What can we do together to bring about change in the area of child participation?”

she argued that **solving stigma, structural discrimination and marginalization** is central to include vulnerable children. Children's participation can be strengthened by enabling everyone to access **inclusive education services** and **health services** that allow families to take part. Moreover, **adequate family incomes** and **housing** ensure that children are living in conditions where they are more likely to have the energy, time and environments that enable choices to participate. Another aspect to be tackled, she argued, was the negative perception of Roma and other marginalized groups by **promoting positive awareness** and challenging all anti-Gypsyism and other forms of discrimination that are present in political, media and popular discourse. In order to do so, **building a critical mass** can be instrumental in changing people's mentality and cultural prejudice and can help bring about short-term gains and long-term changes that are necessary. Last but not least, **co-working with marginalized children and families** to raise awareness through campaigns, community events, self-advocacy activities about equal rights has been proven to be among the most efficient expedients available, in her experience.²

Children can participate in different ways, but what is central in their engagement is their **role as primary agents** in the causes they decide to participate in. Adults need to provide opportunities for children to set agendas and take decisions about resources, for instance. However, the objective would still be to enable children to be agents, and not to 'responsibilise' them, to avoid letting them down if something goes wrong.

² For more information on her presentation please refer to the PowerPoints presentations available [here](#).

II. Ethical considerations and safeguarding processes – Ms Ruth Farrugia

Child safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, and it requires adults' commitment and assistance to ensure children are protected. It cannot be taken for granted and regular training must be ensured. Safeguarding requires:

- Considering each **child as an individual** with a right to be protected – it is not the same to safeguard a 4 or 14 years old, different measures must be in place and tailored to children's needs.
- Making a concerted and mindful effort to **prevent** harm to children – prevention is the main way to safeguard children and protect them from harm as it means to prevent harm from occurring; prevention may be directed at changing attitudes to children and the way children are treated, e.g. by ensuring that child participation is a right that children may exercise or decline, rather than a standard that must be fought each time.
- Sharing the **ethos of safeguarding** with colleagues – responsibly engaging workers who understand and appreciate safeguarding;
- **Taking action** to enable all children to have the best outcomes – responding to harm in an adequate way also helps preventing that specific harm from re-occurring.

At the core of safeguarding, as of all children's rights issues, is the **best interests of the child**, which must always be taken as a paramount consideration.

Ms Farrugia argued that in order to exercise child safeguarding rights, the 5 Rs must be guaranteed. These include: 1) **Recognising** that the child is at risk of harm; 2) **Responding** to the situation in a professional and ethical manner; 3) **Reporting**; 4) **Recording** appropriately; 5) **Referring** the child to a relevant professional. In the case of vulnerable children there could be issues which add to the complexity of implementing this practice. In fact, additional considerations and care should be taken particularly regarding **privacy** and **confidentiality** issues, as well as extra protection measures.

One of the reasons why safeguarding is pivotal in all contexts and environments in which the child live, is because children are usually reluctant to report harm. This may happen for many reasons, including fear of not being believed or fear of retaliation. To safeguard vulnerable groups, **children must be told of the safeguards** in place and the options available to them in a manner they understand. Once a child does share information with an adult, he/she has an ethical (and in some countries legal) responsibility to act upon it. Child participation requires adults to empower children by encouraging them to make their own decisions and provide informed consent; promote their well-being and take their views, wishes, feelings and beliefs into account; explain in an appropriate and accessible way what decisions have been take, and why.

“Safeguarding the child is best achieved when participation rights are respected”.

Many adults and professionals do not report, as they may be overwhelmed by feelings, be in a state of confusion or fear various consequences. This is why **trainings** for professionals working with children are so important.³

³ For more information on her presentation please refer to the PowerPoints presentations available [here](#).

III. Consulting vulnerable children online: Maximizing opportunities, challenges and recommended measures – Ms Ioana Bara-Busila

The participation of children online is one of the most pressing issues that the world is facing at this moment in time because of rapid digital development which has been taken advantage of during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Due to digital divides the participation of children online is diversified, and for some groups of children limited.** Therefore, the rights of children in vulnerable situations should be addressed as a whole (both online and offline) in order to maximise participation rights. For example, to fulfill the right to education for all children which could ensure, among others, their digital literacy, vulnerable children should be enabled to follow classes remotely; or to fulfil their right to information, which would enable them to participate in an informed way, access to diverse information should be guaranteed.

“If the basic needs and rights of children are not met the possibility of setting the floor for the right to be heard becomes difficult”.

The right to participation is a corollary to all the rest of the rights and we have to ensure children have the right tools to enjoy such right. Indeed, the promotion of digital literacy is central to the realisation of children’s rights and vice-versa. **Digital education is best achieved through schools** which integrate courses in their curricula and provide students with technical and functional competences to use a wide range of online tools and resources, including content creation and critical thinking in the digital environment. At the same time, **extracurricular activities** should also include some digital component to broaden children’s skills and their opportunities, teaching them about the risks and how to safeguard themselves. These strategies will enable shaping children’s development and make them become **active digital citizens**.

In general, there are different challenges faced when engaging children in online settings, such as the potential **misuse of personal data, cyberaggression, hate speech, cyber-bullying, automated processes, fake news, danger of addiction**, among others. Vulnerable children experience aggravated risks online, that include **financial barriers** (lack of access to internet and devices), that in turn lead to a **lack of digital skills, guidance**, and often **lack dominance of English** to participate in international forums.

Some groups of vulnerable children also face additional specific challenges that need to be considered when engaging them in online participatory processes. For example, in the case of child victims, attention should be paid to ensure that their **location** is not revealed. Or in the case of children with disabilities, challenges relate mostly to the **lack of necessary accessibility features, lack of teachers’ expertise** in teaching through adapted tools, or **discrimination** from peers.

For this reason, to engage vulnerable children online, additional care must be taken in safeguarding as well as empowering them to express their voice.

Necessary measures:

- **Child-friendly** platforms and materials;
- Translate content in **minority languages**;
- Diversity of information and reliable resources;
- **Special features** for certain groups of children (e.g. safety-by-design and privacy-by-design tools, special features for children with disabilities);
- **Data protection**;

Good practices examples

- *Awareness raising* – organise a drawing **competition** on the children’s right to participate in the digital age;
- *Digital literacy* – **workshops** for kids on fake news / applications / platforms;
- *Online behavior / combatting cyber-risks* – at school, include children in the **action group for combatting cyber-bullying**;
- *Online **debate** competitions* – develop children’s capacity to express themselves;
- *Enhance expression, creativity, strategic thinking* – **online games** adapted to children’s evolving capacity, interactive and play-based tools that stimulate skills such as creativity, teamwork and problem solving;
- *Balance **online / offline** activities & interactions*;

Specificities on the participation of different groups of vulnerable children

In this section, the three experts dived into the specificities of the participation of children belonging to three different groups: children in out of home care, children with disabilities, and children survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

IV. Getting the perspectives of children in out of home care – Ms Raluca Verwijen-Slamnescu

The ability of children in out-of-home care to participate drastically depends on four main variables: 1) **their equal value** as children and young people in care; 2) their **caregivers**; 3) the **culture** where they grow and develop; 4) the **policy and practice** of care. The expert used 4 different testimonials to prove that children in care not only have the right but also the need to participate.

Child participation is a universal right of all children, and it is equally a process to support their development as well as social inclusion.

“Participatory interactions and programmes offer an opportunity to unlearn helplessness and learn an empowered sense of self”

[Young woman from Finland]

Indeed, children in out of home care are **entitled to be heard regarding their care planning**, wishes for the present and the future. In some institutions, children are also able to contribute to other children’s care planning, shifting their perception of being a victim towards appreciation of his/her own ability to contribute to the others’ wellbeing.

Caregivers must understand and value participation and create opportunities for children to participate.

“Adults should create a safe space where children have the occasion to participate and this should be normal standard”

[Young woman from the Czech Republic]

Still today children in care do not get the chance to have a say in matters that concern them, which leads them to think that they are not part of decision-making processes at all. If children are not engaged, their best interests cannot be fulfilled. Many caregivers do not support and/or appreciate children in care speaking out about their experiences.

Without **enabling environments** for children to participate, children in alternative care risk not being able to be heard at all. A **culture of co-creation of children and adults** should be established, which sees the support and willingness of the latter to hear and act upon the former’s suggestions. The expert explained that it is the combination of the following three factors to enable such a child participation culture: **information and assistance for children**, selection and training of staff, and independent procedures to monitor and track progress.

Children and young people in out of home care are the best placed to inform the development of policies and practice of alternative care settings.

“When you know the system firsthand (...) you know the problems children and young people have to face”

No one else knows how it feels to face this kind of discrimination in society as a marginalized group and their lack of access to different services. Moreover, their input is of great help when it comes to transitioning to independence and adulthood after leaving care.

V. Involvement of children with intellectual disabilities – Ms Aneta Teneva

It is always important to bear in mind that child participation, regardless of whether the child is vulnerable or not, is always **voluntary**. Children will be encouraged to participate if adults create a **friendly environment** where they feel comfortable and **respect their opinions**. They will also have more ideas on what they think about a certain topic if they are **informed** and if they get the chance to **exchange** with both adults and peers on it. Finally, they should be clear about the objective and **usefulness** of their intervention in order to learn from it and contribute as much as possible.

Children with intellectual disabilities should have the same opportunities as other children to participate. They can be engaged in **day-to-day decision making** as well as **public decision making** in policy at all levels. They can also be consulted to **design new services**, especially those relevant to them. It is not unusual for these children to be involved in projects to seek their **strategic input, monitoring** and **evaluation** of tools and services as well as **research**.

All in all, this group of children can participate in any setting, it just needs different methods and tools to be able to understand and express themselves appropriately. For example, among the most successful ways of involving children with intellectual disabilities there are **individual creative works** and **working groups, advisory groups, collective self-advocacy, local and national networks**, as well as children as **researchers**.

22 communication tips to use with children with intellectual disabilities:



VI. Participation of survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation – Ms Mariana Yevsyukova

As many other groups of children, child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation mostly stay silent for various reasons, such as lack of knowledge and awareness about reporting mechanisms, lack of specialised services and child-friendly support for child victims and lack of resources allocated to care.

“Feeling stigma prevents you from getting help and from healing”

[Participant to the Global Survivors Forum, November 2016]

As Article 9(1) of the Lanzarote Convention states, survivors can be agents of change if empowerment and provided with opportunities of safe and meaningful participation. With no doubts, child victims can participate in any kind of decision-making process, but their views are particularly important in the following areas:

Recovery and reintegration – Survivors can participate in decision-making regarding their own recovery and integration (R&R), shaping the organisations’ and systems’ services. Moreover, they can also be of great support to each other with peer exercises as this helps normalise their lives. They can also take part in participatory group works addressing sexual violence as it plays a role in their individual empowerment. Good practices include:

- ✓ European projects – ‘LEAP’, ‘Our Voices’, group work-based advocacy projects by Our Voices and Different & Equal in Albania; The National Center for Child Abuse Prevention (NCCAP) in Moldova and ATINA in Serbia;
- ✓ UK based projects – ‘Be Healthy’; ‘One of the Gang’; ‘Making Justice Work’; ‘Learning from the Experts’.

Prevention – Survivors play a crucial role in the development of prevention material as they know how the subject should be tackled. They can do this by developing child-friendly material for peers, raising awareness among children at risk and developing and implementing targeted micro-projects. Good practices include:

- ✓ Youth Partnership Programme on Empowerment of the Child Survivors and at-risk Youth against Commercial Sexual Exploitation, ECPAT international in 15 countries 2006-2011.

Organisational governance – multi-level approach that centrally involves children in all stages of governance from the local level to the global level. Listening to children’s voices is equally important as for those voices to be heard, it’s a two ways exercise. Good practices include:

- ✓ ECPAT International Child and Youth Advisory Committee, Child Helpline International Youth Advisory Council, SAIEVAC Regional Children’s Forum and Board, Survivors’ run organisations.

Research – it can involve several levels of survivors’ participation from more passive to more active. This means that children can be part of a project as research subjects, as consultants, as collaborators and work in partnership with the researchers or as leaders if supported in an appropriate way. Good practices include:

- ✓ Access to Justice and Remedies Research: Through the Eyes of the Child, ECPAT International (2017)

Advocacy – Engaging survivors later in their lives needs to be thought as an opportunity rather than an expectation from them. There are some children who are also willing to participate in some form in their early life and this is usually done in creative ways rather than structured ways, to give them the freedom to express their feelings without putting them into words. Good practices include:

- ✓ Global Survivors Forum for adults survivors of childhood sexual exploitation by ECPAT International and Council of Europe, November 2016.

“Speaking out can make us a target. But we speak out to protect other children from being sexually exploited”.

[Participant to the Global Survivors’ Forum, November 2016]

Recommendations and resources

VII. Lessons learned

- ✓ Digital inclusion and participation can support children to realise the full range of their rights. There are more chances to meaningfully consult children with disabilities or in a vulnerable situation via the digital technologies, they are more likely than other kids to be exposed to online harm. Both adults and children need to be educated to address a wide range on online risks
- ✓ “One size fits all” approach doesn’t work when engaging survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation. Every child’s recovery process is different. There is no meaningful and ethical participation of the survivors without recovery.
- ✓ As the barriers to inclusive and impactful children’s participation are long term and structural, it will take real commitment, imagination and resources. But it can be done!
- ✓ Strong adults’ commitment to feedback and follow up about how children’s participation influenced outcomes is a very important part of meaningful collaboration with children.
- ✓ Child participation process is as important as its outcomes. It is even more important for vulnerable children and young people.

VIII. Interesting resources:

Resources shared in the chat during the event:

- Larkins, C., et al. – [Working back to the future: Strengthening radical and social work with children and young people and their perspectives on resilience, capabilities and overcoming diversity](#)
- SOS Children’s Villages – [When care ends: Lessons learnt from peer research](#)
- Safer Young Lives Research Centre – [Our voices](#)
- ACT2gether – [Video series on inter-generational co-creations](#)
- ECPAT International and Council of Europe – [Global Survivors’ Forum, its information paper](#) and an [article](#) by one of the survivors who participated at the event.

Resources shared during the Council of Europe High-level conference on “Progress towards meaningful child participation at all levels – a multi-stakeholder dialogue”:

- 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](#)