

Valuing Children's Potential



**How children's participation contributes to
fighting poverty and social exclusion**

Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Our work is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Eurochild's activities include:

- Sharing information on policy and practice;
- Monitoring and influencing policy development at national and European level;
- Creating interest groups and partnerships between member organizations;
- Representing the interests of its members to international institutions;
- Strengthening the capacity of its members through training, individual advice and support.

Eurochild has members in 35 countries all over Europe (both within and outside of the EU).

Published in September 2010 by:

Eurochild
Avenue des Arts, 1-2
B-1210 Brussels
T: +32 (0)2 511 70 83
F: +32 (0)2 511 72 98
www.eurochild.org
info@eurochild.org

The views expressed in this book are those of Eurochild and do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

This publication is supported by the **European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity** (2007-2013). This programme is managed by the Directorate-General for Employment, social affairs and equal opportunities of the European Commission. It was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment and social affairs area, as set out in the Social Agenda, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy goals in these fields.

The seven-year Programme targets all stakeholders who can help shape the development of appropriate and effective employment and social legislation and policies, across the EU-27, EFTA-EEA and EU candidate and pre-candidate countries. PROGRESS' mission is to strengthen the EU contribution in support of Member States' commitments and efforts to create more and better jobs and to build a more cohesive society. To that effect, PROGRESS will be instrumental in:

- providing analysis and policy advice on PROGRESS policy areas;
- monitoring and reporting on the implementation of EU legislation and policies in PROGRESS policy areas;
- promoting policy transfer, learning and support among Member States on EU objectives and priorities; and
- relaying the views of the stakeholders and society at large.

For more information see: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/progress/index_en.html

Valuing Children's Potential

**How children's participation contributes to
fighting poverty and social exclusion**

Edited by Mieke Schuurman

September 2010

eurochild 

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to all the adults and children who have been interviewed and without whom it would have been impossible to write this book: Gaëlle Buyschaert (UNICEF Belgium), Nele Lefevere (UNICEF Belgium), Jan van Gils (Kind en Samenleving Belgium), Emilie Dalen (17, KREM, Norway), Cathrine Skar (KREM, Norway), Amy (17, Action for Children, UK), Morgan (12, Action for Children, UK), Mark Benson (Action for Children, UK), Mareló Aneas (Centre Esclat Bellvitge, FEDAIA, Spain), Anna-Maria (16, Cypriot Children's Parliament, Cyprus), Anthonilla (13, Cypriot Children's Parliament, Cyprus), Ninetta Kazantzis (Pancyprian Parliamentary Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children, Cyprus), Darren Bird (Funky Dragon, Wales, UK), Cato Oosterwijk (26, Dutch National Youth Council, the Netherlands), Willemijn Phielix (25, Dutch National Youth Council, the Netherlands), Ivo (16, youth care institution, the Netherlands), Stephan (15, youth care institution, the Netherlands), and Ton van der Gaag (youth care institution, the Netherlands).

The illustrations were produced by children and young people aged 4 to 19 years old, and were supported by Action for Children's Easington Emotional Wellbeing Project. All of the children have previously been involved in participation activities, and many had the opportunity to be involved in the recruitment of Action for Children staff. The groups worked with an art therapist to design and create their illustrations. The young artists were: Chantelle, Chloe, Summer, Alex, Georgina, Glen, Jorja, Rachel, Savannah, Bradley, Carl, Lewis, Kevin, Alex, Dean, Andrew, John, Jordan, Nicole, Thomas, Jodie, Chris, Lee, Gavin, Cain, Anthony, Christian, David, and Chris.

In their introductions to the different sections and case studies, the experts who have contributed to the book provide valuable research evidence: **Natália Fernandes**, University of Child Education Sciences, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal; **Gerison Lansdown**, an international children's rights consultant who has published and lectured widely on children's rights, including on children's and young people's participation; **Jenny Pearce**, Professor of Young People and Public Policy and Director of the Institute of Applied Social Research, University of Bedfordshire, UK; **Mona Sandbaek**, Senior Researcher at Oslo University College and at NOVA, a research institute under the auspices of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research in Norway; **Nigel Thomas**, Professor of Childhood and Youth Research at the University of Central Lancashire.

Thanks also to Jana Hainsworth, Secretary General of Eurochild for her support and valuable comments; Reka Velenyi, Policy Assistant at Eurochild,

for carrying out the interview for the Spanish case study and to Marie Dubit for doing the lay-out for the book.

About the editor and author of the case studies

Mieke Schuurman is an independent expert on children's rights and European policies. She has carried out research assignments and workshops since 2009, and has developed advocacy tools for various international organisations and children's rights NGOs, including on child poverty and social exclusion. Prior to this, she was Secretary-General of the European Children's Network where she campaigned for children's rights at European level. She also led the successful campaign to include children's rights in the European Constitution, involving children from 11 European countries. She lives in the Netherlands. Email: mieke.schuurman@tiscali.nl

Preface

by **Mária Herczog**

Eurochild President, Member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

As newly elected President of the Eurochild network it gives me great pleasure to be introducing our latest publication on a subject close to my heart: children's participation.

The right to be heard – as provided for in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child– is one of the four key principles of the Convention, meaning that it needs to be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights. In 2009 the UNCRC Committee issued a General Comment giving guidance to governments on how to apply Article 12, stating the Convention "*cannot be fully implemented if the child is not respected as a subject with her or his own views...*". In reality (as stated by Gerison Lansdown in her introduction to chapter 3), "*there is still a mountain to climb before it can be claimed that all countries in the EU are respecting the right of all children to be heard in all matters affecting them*".

The case studies presented in this book describe just a few of the pioneering examples of where children are given a voice. We argue that efforts to tackle child poverty and social exclusion can only be fully effective if they find ways to empower children and involve them in decision-making. The benefits to the children directly involved are self-evident – as all the children interviewed for this book testify. But participation can have a much wider impact on policy change, on attitudes of service providers and the quality of the services delivered, and ultimately on public attitudes to children. Such a shift in mentality can make a crucial difference to breaking cycles of poverty and creating a society in which every child is allowed to flourish.

This book is part of Eurochild's contribution to the 2010 European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion. During the year we are promoting 9 key policy messages – the first of which is *empowering children*. The examples in this book give some ideas as to *how* this can be done; the introductions by academic experts in the field give more compelling arguments about why it is so important. The book accompanies our year-long on-line campaign 'www.endchildpoverty.eu' which is collecting signatures and messages – particularly from children and young people themselves.

Children and families are being hit hard by the on-going economic crisis. Cuts in public spending are already affecting the capacity of our members to work with the most vulnerable children. We are convinced that efforts to consult and involve children need to be reinforced, not cut back. It is not just about creating life-changing experiences for the children involved, but also involves building a culture where all children are valued and respected for what they have to bring. This is the best – and most cost-effective – long-term route out of poverty and social exclusion.

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Preface	3
Contents	5
How to use this book ?	7
Introduction	
The concept of children’s participation by Nigel Thomas	11
Chapter 1: Participation and our understanding of poverty	15
Introduction	
The importance of a child’s perspective on poverty by Mona Sandbæk	17
Case study	
How do children living in poverty experience their living conditions? UNICEF Belgium	19
Case study	
How children’s life experiences can enlighten care professionals KREM, Norway	23
Chapter 2: Participation and improving services	27
Introduction	
Young people, participation and empowerment by Jenny Pearce	29
Case study	
Children have a say in staff recruitment and selection Action for Children, England, UK	33
Case study	
Empowering children to share their views and opinions FEDAIA, Catalonia, Spain	39

Chapter 3: Participation and improving policies	43
Introduction	
Addressing the balance of power by Gerison Lansdown	45
Case study	
Putting children’s rights into practice in Cyprus Cypriot Children’s Parliament, Cyprus	47
Case study	
Welsh children get heard by the UN Committee on the rights of the child Funky Dragon, Wales, UK	51
Chapter 4: Participation and peer support	57
Introduction	
Respecting the rights of children in care institutions promotes citizenship by Natália Fernandes	59
Case study	
Children in a youth care institution trained by peers to set up Youth Council Dutch National Youth Council, The Netherlands	61
Conclusions and recommendations	67
Conclusions	69
Recommendations	71

How to use this book?

Eurochild, an international network of organisations working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people, is **giving a voice to children in Europe**. Through use of concrete case studies, this book demonstrates how children and young people can participate and get involved in decisions affecting their lives. Moreover, it also explores how they can contribute to the fight against child poverty and social exclusion. The case studies are also supported by the relevant research evidence of well-established experts and academics in the field of children and young people's participation.

Eurochild's work is underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This book develops the arguments for the implementation of one of the four key principles of the UN CRC: **'children have the right to say what they think in decisions that affect them and their opinions should be taken into account'**.

The book is structured around four different sections with **a general introduction by Nigel Thomas, Professor of Childhood and Youth Research at the University of Central Lancashire in the UK**. He has taught and researched extensively in the field of children's welfare, rights and participation.

Each section describes one or two case studies, which have been chosen as **models of good practice** regarding involving children and young people. The case studies come from Eurochild member organisations from across Europe or have been provided by the academic experts in this book. They illustrate different models of good practice, including national and regional children's parliaments; local level projects working with disadvantaged children; participation projects organised by service providers for children and the involvement of different age groups. Most case studies involve children between 11 and 18 years old, however, some projects, such as the Spanish example from FEDAIA and Action for Children in the UK demonstrate how participation works with very young children, from as young as 3 years old and beyond.

Each of the four sections has a different focus in relation to children's participation. The first section explores **children's participation and their own understandings of poverty**. It refers to two case studies from UNICEF Belgium and KREM (Norway) to illustrate what matters to children who experience poverty and social exclusion, which issues are important to them and what needs to be taken into account when developing policies to

combat child poverty. In both cases, children experiencing social exclusion or poverty have taken part in participation projects and talk about their dreams for the future and about improvements that could be made to their living environments. **Mona Sandbaek**, a researcher at NOVA and Oslo University College in Norway, introduces these two case studies with relevant research evidence.

The second section looks at **children’s participation and their ability to influence the improvement of services for children and young people**.

This section is introduced by **Jenny Pearce**, Professor of Young People and Public Policy at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. She has wide experience of working with disadvantaged children and young people, particularly young women who have been sexually abused. The case studies describe how children are involved in the recruitment and selection of staff who will work with children (Action for Children - UK) and discusses the involvement of very young children who are at risk of being socially excluded or in situations of abandonment are involved in Catalonia (FEDAIA - Spain). In both case studies different methods have been used to involve children of various age groups and from different contexts, such as children living in foster care.

The third section focuses on **children’s views on policies affecting children experiencing poverty or social exclusion**. The Cypriot Children’s Parliament and the Welsh Children’s Assembly, Funky Dragon, focus their discussions on broader policy issues which affect child poverty and social exclusion policies. The Cypriot Children’s Parliament has, for example, achieved better access to schools for children with special needs and a change in the school curricula. Children and young people at Funky Dragon carried out a consultation involving more than 10,000 children in Wales. The results contributed to an alternative report presented to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. This section of the book is introduced by **Gerison Lansdown**, a well-recognised international children’s rights consultant, who has published widely on children’s rights, including on children’s participation.

The last section looks at **children’s participation and peer support**.

Children living in a closed youth care institution in the Netherlands receive training by young trainers of the Dutch National Youth Council about how to set up youth councils in the institutions where they live. The children feel more comfortable when training is given by young people and the results are very positive: they have achieved concrete changes in their living conditions at the institution. **Dr Natália Fernandes**, from the University of Minho (Braga, Portugal) introduces this section and she rightly points out that children can become protagonists of their own lives when they participate in a youth council in an institution.

All case studies describe the methods and processes used to support children's participation and the outcomes and results of these consultations. In each case study, one or more people involved in the participation process with the children have been interviewed. Where possible, children and young people involved in each participation process have been interviewed. All people interviewed, including children and adults, have consented to being quoted.

Introduction

The concept of children's participation

by **Nigel Thomas**

Nigel Thomas is Professor of Childhood and Youth Research at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. He is also co-director of The Centre, which exists to promote and research children and young people's participation, inclusion and empowerment. He has twenty years of experience of social work practice and has taught and researched extensively in the field of children's welfare, rights and participation.

It is a pleasure to be invited to write the introduction to this important publication from Eurochild. As Europe enters a period of severe economic retrenchment, the impact on children and young people is likely to be harsh, and most at risk are those children and young people who are already disadvantaged by poverty and social exclusion. In this context, Eurochild's leadership of the campaign to end child poverty is doubly important, and so is this book.

In the two decades since all European countries ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, tremendous advances have been made in the promotion and advocacy of children's rights, and in particular their right to participate – not only in decisions affecting their own personal lives, but in social and political life more generally. The extent to which this promotion and advocacy has produced real change in children and young people's lives and experiences is, of course, highly variable. For example, there is considerable evidence of positive benefits for those children who actually take part in participatory activities of various kinds, but much less evidence that those activities lead to improvements for other children and young people.

If the investment of time, effort and creativity, to say nothing of the material and financial resources that have gone into promoting children's rights and participation, do not achieve anything for the poorest children and young people, then the real value of that work is highly questionable. In my own country, the UK, there was widespread shame when the UNICEF study of 2007 was reported as finding that British children were the unhappiest in the rich world. In fact the study did not show that. What it did show was that the poorest young people in the UK were affected more by inequality and its associated effects than young people in other OECD countries¹. The

1. UNICEF (2007), *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries*, (Innocenti Report Card 7), Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

challenge is clear – it is to share the benefits of social and economic progress, and also the costs of the financial crisis, more equally across society, and especially across all children and young people. It is not acceptable that some children should enjoy extremely affluent lives while others are deprived of the necessities for taking a full part in society. Children themselves are often acutely conscious of the unfairness and unacceptability of this situation, in contrast to adults who may have been conditioned to take it for granted.

Children are not only on the receiving end of poverty and disadvantage; they also have much to offer in the struggle for a better world. This includes their instinctive sense of fairness, as well as their ability to bring fresh thinking and new ideas to problems with which adults may have been struggling. The scientist Robert Oppenheimer is reported to have said, *'there are children playing in the streets who could solve some of my top problems in physics, because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago'*. The political theorist Iris Marion Young wrote that including a range of perspectives in the political process is in the interests of society as a whole, for two reasons:

*'Not only does it increase the likelihood of promoting justice because the interests of all are taken into account. It also increases that likelihood by increasing the store of social knowledge available to participants.'*²

In other words, children should be taking part in the struggle for social progress because they have the right to advocate their own interests, and they should also be taking part because they have information and ideas from which everyone can benefit.

The case studies presented in this volume offer striking evidence of the value and potential of children's contributions. Some of the case studies are based in particular on institutional or service contexts, while others are examples of activities in which wider groups of children and young people can engage. As Mona Sandbæk points out, the case studies from UNICEF Belgium and KREM Norway, in very different ways, both reflect a strong commitment to listening to children's own perspectives and ensuring that their experiences and views are taken into consideration in policy-making. They also illustrate how children can contribute to new understandings of (i) what poverty and social exclusion mean for them and (ii) what kind of measures might be effective in fighting poverty and social exclusion. Jenny Pearce draws attention to the risk 'that services may discriminate in favour of involving articulate, compliant and ambitious young people rather than making a genuine effort to involve disadvantaged young people who may be harder to access and to involve'. However, as she notes, the Action for Children case study shows that, for

2.Young, I. M.,(2000), *Inclusion and Democracy*, New York: Oxford University Press, (p.83).

example, learning disabled or very young children can participate in decisions about who is recruited to work with them, and children who are unable to travel from home can still be involved as participants, if practitioners make the effort to include them.

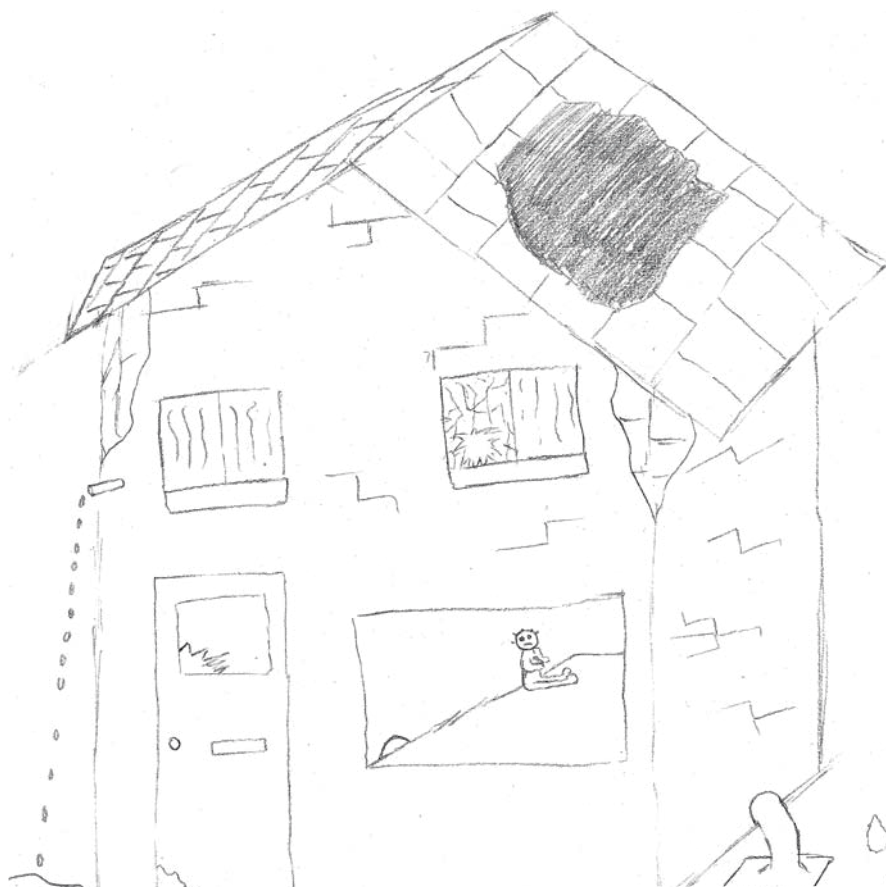
As Gerison Lansdown reminds us, process is as important as outcome, and it is not enough for adults to create opportunities for children to be engaged – *'children themselves must be actively involved from the outset in the creation of the structures and systems through which they can be heard'*. The Funky Dragon case study on which she comments is an excellent example of sustained work to develop those structures and systems – work supported by adults (including substantial support from the Welsh Assembly Government), but led mainly by children and young people.

Natália Fernandes reminds us that children in care institutions are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion and also to abuse, because of the closed and autocratic nature of many such institutions. The example from the Netherlands shows how there are *'other possibilities for organising life within care institutions, based on participatory principles, on mutual support, on cooperation and partnership, and on dialogue and intervention, which are fundamental mechanisms for the promotion of an active citizenship of children and young people'*; and that these processes can produce tangible benefits for young people.

In short, all the case studies in this volume, in their very different ways, provide inspiring examples of how the most disadvantaged or 'deprived' young people can, with the right support, engage seriously with the conditions of their own lives and even contribute to the improvement of social life for all. In that there lies hope, for Europe and for the world.

Chapter 1

Participation and our understanding of poverty



Introduction

The importance of a child's perspective on poverty

by **Mona Sandbæk**

Mona Sandbæk is senior researcher at the Nordic Centre of Excellence in Welfare Research (NOVA) and Oslo University College, Norway. NOVA is a research institute under the auspices of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research in Norway. Mona has published extensively in the area of child welfare, child poverty, and children's living conditions.

The two case studies 'What do you Think?' from UNICEF Belgium and KREM Norway, both reflect a strong commitment to listening to children's own perspectives and to ensuring that their experiences and views are taken into consideration in the policy-making process. This commitment is in accordance with the UNCRC Article 12, granting children the right to participate. The studies provide examples not only of children and young people participating as informants in research, but also as partners in actions to improve their situations. The two studies illustrate how children contribute to new understandings of what poverty means for them and what kind of measures might be effective in fighting poverty and social exclusion.

Children's dual agency

During the last decade, children have been included as both subjects of analysis and informants in an increasing number of studies on child poverty. Through sharing their experiences, they have revealed a dual focus of their agency. Firstly, they use a variety of strategies to cope with their daily lives. Avoiding being excluded from the social life at school and from leisure activities is a primary concern of many poor children. Secondly, they also try to protect their parents in various ways, such as not asking for items and activities which their parents cannot afford (Redmond 2008).

Parents give priority to their children

International research has shown that the majority of poor parents give priority to their children. They often go without necessary items themselves and avoid buying necessities for the house to give priority to their children's

needs (Chasse et al 2003, Thorød 2006, Sandbæk 2008, Redmond 2008). If these strategies are not sufficient, many borrow from family and friends, or go into debt, as mentioned in the UNICEF study from Belgium. However, low income may also cause conflicts and difficulties. When the economic situation is particularly difficult, parents cannot protect their children, because there is simply no money left to set aside for them. (Middlethton m.fl. 1997).

Partnership with young people

Children and young people can also participate in different forms of action to influence policy makers more directly. Through a user-oriented approach, the organisation KREM is working in partnership with young people who have dropped out of school and are not yet established in working life, demonstrating young people's motivation, responsibility and creativity.

Participation on young people's terms

How can we take children's participation in the public sphere from tokenism to genuine consultation? This was one of the topics considered during the UN Celebration of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Geneva, October 2009. To achieve this goal, it must be borne in mind that, as with all like children in general, children growing up in poverty are a heterogeneous group. They have different experiences, views and solutions. Research and user involvement must respect and reflect this fact. Furthermore, all participation must respect children's rights to dignity and privacy. Participation is a right, not a duty! This is why adults must explore with the young participants themselves what they find are the most meaningful ways of participating.

References

- Chasse, K.A. Zander, M. and Rasch, K.,(2003), *Meine Familie ist arm: Wie Kinder in Grundschulalter Armut erleben und bewältigen*, Opladen: Leske and Budrich.
- Middlethton, S., Ashworth, K. and Braithwaite, I., (1997), *Small Fortunes: Spending on Children, Childhood Poverty and Parental Sacrifice*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Redmond, G. (2008), *Children's Perspectives on Economic Adversity: A Review of the Literature*, Florence: UNICEF.
- Sandbæk, M. (ed), (2008), *Barns levekår.Familiens inntekt og barns levekår over tid*, Oslo: NOVA.
- Thorød, A.B. (2006), *En normal barndom? Foreldrestrategier for å skjerne barn fra konsekvenser av å leve med lav inntekt*, Oslo: NOVA.

Case Study

How do children living in poverty experience their living conditions?

Case study from UNICEF Belgium (realised by the **Research Centre 'Child and Society'** in Belgium) - *Interview with: Gaëlle Buyschaert, Child Rights Officer, UNICEF Belgium; Nele Lefevere, temporary Child Rights Officer, UNICEF Belgium; Jan van Gils, Director, Kind en Samenleving (Child and Society).*

How do children and young people experience poverty? UNICEF Belgium commissioned Kind en Samenleving (Child and Society) to find out. Poverty, and children's experience of it, has preoccupied UNICEF Belgium for several years. The combination of the European Year against Poverty of 2010 and the interest of the Belgian Presidency of the EU, provided the opportunity to develop a specific project in the framework of UNICEF Belgium's "What do you Think?" project.



UNICEF Belgium is committed to listening to children and ensuring that their views and experiences count in the policy-making process. In 1999 UNICEF launched the project "What do you Think?" which aimed to bring children's views to the UNCRC committee, complementing the NGOs alternative report and the State report.

"What do you Think?" shifted its focus to the participation of vulnerable children in Belgium, embracing the experiences and recommendations of unaccompanied migrant children, children in hospitals, children in conflict with the law and children with disabilities. Their voices have been heard and reflected upon in specific recommendations from the UNCRC Committee to the Belgian government.

Children must want to be involved

'Kind en Samenleving' has been working with six existing organised groups of children aged from 11 to 18 in some of the most deprived areas of Belgium. The groups, involving a total of 110 children and young people come from different regions both Flemish and French speaking, and reflect a gender balance between boys and girls. The majority of the young people have a migrant background; others have parents of Belgian origin who may themselves have grown up in poverty. All the kids are growing up in

households with low incomes and are at high risk of social exclusion. The selection was carried out in collaboration with organisations fighting poverty.

Participation in the research project is entirely voluntary, so the children need to be convinced that there is something in it for them. One way of gaining their interest is to be creative in the tools used to gather the information. Different groups are using different techniques. Each group has its own approach, either group work or one-to-one interviews, depending on what is most appropriate to the children and young people involved. The methods used are intended to empower the children and young people. Children are not asked to discuss 'their poverty', but they discuss their feelings about their living environment and their life in general.

"Qualitative research with young people helps to go beyond popular myths generated by the media or simple statistics", says Jan van Gils.

In Liège the youngsters interviewed their social workers and people living in their neighbourhood about the theme of being at risk of poverty. This was followed by a discussion with the young people about their opinions on poverty. In Eeklo, boys and girls between 11 and 14 years old worked in a chat box style to tell their stories. In Antwerp, young people of between 16 and 18 years old took photos of their living environment and explained what is important to them through discussing their photos together. In Antwerp, a group of younger children of 11-16 year olds participated in activities and games in their neighbourhood and wrote a RAP song together with a professional. Boys and girls worked in separate groups during their activities in Antwerp. Groups of children of different ages (from 12-18 years old) also worked around the theme of their neighbourhood in Brussels. Part of the activities were also filmed on video.



The researchers involved closely followed the activities and discussions within each group. The meetings took place in the young people's own meeting places, to ensure that they felt at ease. *"Trust and openness within the group and with the researcher are crucial to gather the best results",* explains Jan van Gils.

Exclusion more important than poverty *per se*

Children's perceptions of their living situation do not always correspond

to adults' own expectations. Most children do not recognise themselves as experiencing poverty; they say things such as *"that's something which happens in the "third world" and "poor people are those people living on the streets"*. Indicators of household income poverty seem to be poor proxies for children's experience. One finding from the research is that some parents go out of their way to ensure their children have expensive presents, even if it means going into debt. *"Children often find it difficult to position themselves in classical divisions of low-high level income, but they feel different from other children, which they describe as feeling isolated. This "exclusion" is a shared feeling"*, says Gaëlle Buysschaert.

Nine main themes became apparent during the consultation: the young people themselves; their neighbourhood; education; their family; their friends; their future; leisure activities; poverty and the self-esteem of young people. Drawings were used by the researchers in the last feed-back sessions to assess the importance of each theme.

For each thematic area, specific conclusions could be drawn. For example, in relation to their neighbourhood, some children said *"I feel at home in my neighbourhood, we all know each other"*, but others complained about the litter in their neighbourhood and problems with drugs, alcoholism and crime. Regarding education, children realised that while it is important for their future, they also felt that it was a waste of time or something that they were unable to finish.

"We often hear about rising levels of criminality among young people or the numbers of kids who drop out of school early", says Jan Van Gils. *"Actually we need to understand what leads kids to negative behaviour patterns or why they lose their motivation to attend school. The children we speak to know that education is important"*.

Autonomy and self-esteem are key

On the whole, children tend to focus on the positive rather than the negative aspects of their living environment.

They attach high importance to their level of autonomy and at the same time consider it very important to be supported by adults, particularly those in the educational system and their families. Many children felt that they are not sufficiently supported in these areas and are not involved in decisions affecting them. Greater autonomy and self-esteem is achieved by children and young people's interaction with their environment, the support given to them by family, friends, child and youth participation activities and education, as well as through external influences.

Given the opportunity, children can bring about positive change

"If there were more child and youth participation activities in our neighbourhoods, there would be less complaining about young people", say children and young people involved in the Belgium projects. During one of the participation activities the young people complained about the litter in their neighbourhood and then decided to clean it up. This brought them into contact with their neighbours, who no longer considered them to be a nuisance, but, rather, treated them with more respect. Child participation leads to positive results both for children and young people and the environment in which they live.

Other children criticised a campaign against petty crime which involved posters being put up around school. *"If we had been consulted about the campaign, we would have come up with much more effective ways of communicating the message!"* the children say. This underlines another key message of the consultation: children want to be involved in decision-making and they can make very positive contributions.

Jan van Gils states that *"by listening to children, our researchers can paint a better picture of what's important to children and outline which policy interventions could make the greatest difference in their lives"*. The young people are also given the chance to discuss and give feedback on the outcomes of the researcher's analysis.

In Belgium the project's results are awaited with anticipation. The Belgian government has put child poverty high on the agenda of its EU Presidency in 2010 and support for children's participation is a key message. The project complements the work of the King Baudouin Foundation which also gives a high priority to children's participation. UNICEF Belgium will be using the research outcomes to push for change at regional, national and European level and for societal dialogue on the rights and the participation of children living in poverty.



© UNICEF/NYHQ2008-1743/
Teona Menabdishvili

For more information:

<http://www.unicef.be/nl/project-belgium/kinderen-armoede> (Dutch)

<http://www.unicef.be/fr/project-belgium/enfants-vivant-dans-la-pauvrete> (French)

Case study

How children's life experiences can enlighten care professionals

Case study from KREM (Creativity and Diversity in the Work Life), Norway - Interview with Cathrine Skar, Advisor at KREM and Emilie Dalen (17 years old)



KREM is a social entrepreneurship organisation working to promote and create more creative and diverse working lives. KREM develops and executes pilot projects, projects and learning laboratories aimed at empowering and enabling groups of people excluded from or temporarily outside of the work-force or school/educational system. KREM is involved in different projects, including fighting child poverty and projects with young people leaving school.

Group work builds mutual trust and respect

"This year in February I dropped out of school. I got into contact with KREM via my mother. People in KREM asked me whether I would like to join a group with other young people who had the same experiences as me", tells Emilie, who is 17 years old. Emilie joined a group of four people who all dropped out of school and met with them on a regular basis during a period of two months. *"It was a miracle that other young people listened to me and shared similar experiences",* she said.

The group discussions were facilitated by an adult. *"We liked him very much, because he was not like a teacher, but more like a team player",* remembered Emilie. *"We did not know each other before we came together in the group and so we were honest with each other. We learned a lot about having respect for each other".* As well as the group discussions, Emilie took a lot of photos, particularly of the graffiti at the skate boarding area.

At the end of each day the young people evaluated their day and made a 'log': *"this included what we had learned, what we had done and what we should do more of, next or not do at all".* The young people did not do an overall evaluation, but this was carried out by researchers working at KREM, based on the 'logs'.

KREM develops models with users, works with a bottom-up approach and carries this out in cooperation with public services. The main objective is to create and develop models and methods which shorten the pathway back to school and/or work life: "When working in partnership with young people excluded from school or work life we discover through workshops and courses their competencies, resources, dreams and creativity".

Helping dreams become reality

As a result of the group discussions the young people made a movie. Each movie was personal and presented an 'alternative' CV, including not only what they had done, but also their skills, what they learned from their life experiences and their dreams. The young people also produced a written presentation of themselves, which accompanied the movie. Every young person's story was supposed to have a happy ending linked to "what you dream about". Emilie's dream was to become a tattoo artist, which she explored in her movie. But in the meantime, she developed another interest: she would like to work with other young people.

When the movies were completed, the young people presented their work to people who work with children and young people like them. *"The reactions of the people who were invited was that some were crying, but it also made them understand young people better"*, tells Emilie.

Emilie will go back to school this autumn, since she believes she needs to finish school to get a job. The group helped her to make this decision. Before going back to school, Emilie will work at KREM on a website for young people: *"The website will be open to young people that have no money to grow up and it will be open to everyone to share their stories, for example what it is like to have a father addicted to alcohol."* The website will be run by young people and Cathrine from KREM will set up a group of adults to coach and support the young people involved.



Photo by Emilie Dalen

Working with school drop-outs in this way helps to build their self-esteem, find out what they want to do, and based on that, helps to connect them with school, employers or the public services.

"The whole concept of the group discussions is centred on the young people's dreams for the future", says Cathrine. Cathrine is responsible for carrying out projects with young people who have left school early, many of whom experience poverty.

Turning life experiences into a resource

Five young people involved in the activities at KREM, including Emilie, have written about their experiences of growing up in poverty and had great fun in doing so. A well-known TV celebrity also helped the young people to write their stories. *"He made a lot of comments about my story, which hurt since it was a true story of my own life, but in the end I learned from it".* The children's stories were also published in a chapter of a book about people experiencing poverty. Telling their stories made the young people feel that they were listened to and that they wanted to tell their stories in public. *"After this experience they felt it changed them in a positive way - they felt that they had been heard",* said Cathrine.

KREM uses participation in all its work with a view to changing policies. *"Increasingly children and young people are being heard, but this does not necessarily mean that services and policies are adapted to what they say",* notes Cathrine Skar.

Child poverty in Norway

Child poverty has been increasing in Norway since 2000. In 2006, almost 8 per cent of all children under 18 years (85,000) were living in households defined as poor by the EU's poverty standard (below 60 percent of the median equivalised household disposable income).

The aim of KREM is to empower young people and to help them recognise their own life experience as a resource for their future choices, or in other words, *'turning experiences into resources'*. These young people are often not in contact with social services, but *'just drift somewhere'*.

Listening to children makes a difference

According to the children participating in the group discussions organised by KREM, the number of school drop-outs can be reduced with changes to the teaching and education system. However, *"the government does not listen to children"* said Emilie, *"the government could make good changes if they would listen to children"*.

"Active participation gives children a sense of dignity and a new experience", Cathrine knows this well from her experience in working with children and young people who have dropped out of school. Children and young people are usually passive recipients of public services, which are predefined. When children and young people are not listened to by public services or their opinions are not taken into account, this affects their self-worth.

KREM is often directly contacted by children who want to be involved in their work, but KREM also invites children via public services - sometimes repeatedly, to encourage them to turn up. KREM employs social workers, higher educational staff and people who have themselves benefitted from KREM's work and can use their experience to help other children and young people.

"Many of these young people have dropped out of everything. Time is important for them, since one year out of school is a long time for a young person", says Cathrine.

The group discussions workshops usually take place over a few months. To date, there have been no evaluations of the long-term impact on the children and young people involved, but similar projects involving adults outside the work force have shown positive results which are also sustained in the long term.

According to KREM, those public services designed to support those who drop out of school and children experiencing poverty do not cooperate with each other, and are not adapted to the needs of the children and young people. KREM works to bring the public agencies and children experiencing poverty and their families together.

"Personally, I have found it surprising that in meetings with public services there is a lack of willingness to integrate the experiences of vulnerable young people in their work. They have a top-down approach, instead of using the experts in the field. Resources can be found in people's personal experiences", explains Cathrine. "Our main objective is that we want to voice the experiences of the young people in all public services and policies, because it is cheaper to do so and it creates better services".

Chapter 2

Participation and improving services



Introduction

Young people, participation and empowerment

by **Jenny Pearce**

Jenny Pearce is Professor of Young People and Public Policy and Director of the Institute of Applied Social Research, University of Bedfordshire, UK. She has researched and worked with sexually exploited young people for several years and has published widely on their participation activities.

Participation is: *"the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is a means by which democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured"*, (Hart, 1992, p.5).

The dominant ideology underpinning 'participation' is that service users are best able to define their own needs and to say how these needs should be met. By participating in developing a service, users are empowered to improve the sustainability and affectivity of interventions (Warrington 2010). In respect to youth work, participation offers an opportunity to challenge the 'imperialist' model of the relationship between children and adults, where adults assume power and authority. Instead, it advances a 'partnership' model where adults and young people share decision making (Coleman 2010). This focus on participatory approaches is supported by the developing children's rights (UN Convention on the rights of the child and UNICEF, 2002).

As experience in involving young people in making decisions about the development and use of services has evolved, some concerns have been expressed. For example, it has been shown that participation can be tokenistic. In order to attract funding or to appear to advance children's rights, young people may be 'added onto' meetings or to pre-determined decision-making processes, giving an appearance of their involvement without addressing established power differentials. Hart presents different styles of participation work with young people as eight steps on a ladder, moving from involving young people as tokens and decoration, to better, genuinely participatory practice (Hart, 1997). Another criticism is that services may discriminate in favour of involving articulate, compliant and ambitious young people rather than making a genuine effort to involve disadvantaged young people who may be harder to access and to involve.

My own work developed participation with young women who experience

sexual violence and sexual exploitation. It presented specific challenges and was particularly resource intensive (Pearce 2009). A two year project evolved with twenty young women who created a booklet describing their problems and suggesting ways in which these problems could be addressed (Doncaster Young Women, 2009). The final product was launched by the young women themselves and has been widely read by both service users and practitioners and policy makers to advance child centred interventions to prevent sexual exploitation. The project taught us three things.

Firstly, that participatory activities need to be adaptable to the changing circumstances of young participants whose home circumstances, health and wellbeing may change dramatically through the course of the work.

Secondly, that although it is time consuming and resource intensive, it is important and productive to involve vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in decisions about what they need and how services should be delivered. This can ensure that all young people, not just those who are articulate and motivated, have a say in effecting change to service delivery.

Thirdly, that the process of participating is understood to be as important as the outcome. That is, the ongoing activity is valued as much as the product it creates. The learning experience which is involved throughout the process of these activities can stimulate disaffected young people to realise their self-worth.

The case studies explored in the chapter below cover other important considerations about involving children and young people as participants. In particular, they look at young people's involvement in making decisions about who is employed to work with them. Focusing on children's participation in the recruitment of staff, the case study gives insight into the problems which can be faced and ways of overcoming them. For example the case study illustrates how learning disabled or very young children can participate in decisions about who is recruited to work with them. It also shows how children who may not be able to travel from their home can be involved as participants: for example, children in foster care who cannot attend the work premises can be consulted in one to one talks with practitioners about the content of the job description. In essence, the case study shows that participation must be treated seriously, offering empowering training to the young people who put themselves forward to participate.

The case study and the work with sexually exploited young people described above both demonstrate that developing a genuine partnership with young people is complex and demanding, but can equip young people with skills and experience and will improve service delivery. This is an important lesson

for all involved in genuine empowerment of children and young people, and in particular, for those working to end child poverty. It can challenge the 'cycle of deprivation' theory (Rutter and Madge 1976) which is based on the determinist assumption that poverty in one generation breeds poverty in the next. Through participation young people can develop the confidence to challenge this assumed cycle, they can learn skills to further their sense of responsibility for their own actions and can also gain knowledge about access to essential resources to further their development. The overarching message is that all services, including those working with the most disadvantaged or damaged young people, can develop participatory activities.

References

- Coleman, J (2010 in press), *The Nature of Adolescence, 4th Edition*, Routledge, London.
- Chambers, R. (1983), *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Chambers, R. (1997), *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Doncaster Young Women (2009), *Out of the Box*, University of Bedfordshire: available from Camille.Warrington@beds.ac.uk.
- Friere, P (1972), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London, London: Penguin.
- Hart, R. (1992), *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*, Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.
- Hart, R. (1997), *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*, London: Earthscan Publications.
- Pearce JJ (2009), *Young People and Sexual Exploitation: It isn't Hidden, You Just Aren't Looking*, London: Routledge.
- Rutter, M and Madge (1976), *Cycles of Disadvantage*, Heinemann: London.
- Warrington, C. (2010), *From Less Harm to More Good: The Role of Children and Young People's Participation in Relation to Sexual Exploitation in Youth and Policy: Special Edition on Young People and Sexual Exploitation*.

Case study

Children have a say in staff recruitment and selection

Case Study from Action for Children, UK - Interviews with Mark Benson, Action for Children Participation Manager, Amy (16 years) and Morgan (12 years).



Action for Children aims to “keep the child at the centre” of all they do. This commitment underpins all their work and is at the heart of their approach to participation and involvement. Participation at Action for Children is seen as a continuum where practice is constantly being developed and embedded in all its work and activities.

All children can have a say in recruitment

One particular aspect of participation work undertaken by Action for Children is to routinely **involve children and young people in recruitment and selection processes**. Their approach has been developed over many years and was recently documented in their publication ‘*The Right Choice*’.

The involvement of children and young people in recruitment is considered right at the start of the process. All project managers embarking on a new recruitment campaign receive prompts which highlight the organisation’s commitment to participation and sign-post appropriate resources and guidance. This ensures that children’s involvement is considered early and avoids common pitfalls like lack of time to develop an approach or to properly prepare children for the role.

The degree of participation will vary according to the type of vacancy, the nature of project that is recruiting, and the interest, ability and understanding of the children and young people involved.

Service user involvement should be seen as a continuum which includes elements such as: young people taking part in ‘adult’ interview panels; parallel children’s interview panels; meet and greet sessions; and group discussions. *“One to one work with young people can also be used, particularly when a group work approach would be inappropriate, e.g. it may*



Mieke Schuurman with Amy, Morgan and Alexia from Action for Children

Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. Their work is tailored to local circumstances, in partnership with children and young people, families, communities and local organisations. As an independent charity, Action for Children

campaigns for changes that will make a difference to all children, young people and families across the UK, as well as those that they support directly.

be difficult to overcome the logistics of bringing together children placed in foster care placements across large geographical areas. One to one sessions will often focus on what the young people would like to see included in the interview or what qualities should be sought in new staff, and can be hugely beneficial to the process”, explains Mark Benson.

To illustrate how children can be included in recruitment, Mark refers to Penhurst, an Action for Children school that supports children with profound and multiple learning difficulties. When interviewed for a position, candidates were also invited to meet some of the children. *“Though many of the children were unable to communicate verbally, their supporting staff used child observation skills along with their knowledge of how the children communicate and engage in their day to day lives to gauge and assess their reaction and response to each different candidate”.*

Other methods used to aid communication for less able children and young people include: visual aids (e.g. sticking smiley/sad faces, words and other images on a board next to photos of the candidates), questionnaires, and symbol voting. The tools used are always adapted to the **age, ability and interest of the children or young people involved**. According to Mark *“the way children and young people participate depends on the type of job role advertised and the situation in which children are placed”.*

Action for Children supports children and young people between 0-25 years. All projects are encouraged to involve children and young people in staff recruitment; this can include direct involvement of children from as young as 6 years, and may also extend to involve children in early years settings using games and activities or through child observation.

Children's interview panels bring new insights

Amy (16) and Morgan (12) have participated in the Action for Children Gloucester Participation Project for over four years and talk about it enthusiastically: *"one of the many interesting projects I do here is recruiting staff for this project, as well as helping other places, like schools or the council, to recruit staff too. We are trained to do it in the correct way and to interview without any bias or prejudice. As well as formal interviews like asking questions for selecting staff, we also use creative work, such as arts and crafts in different tasks. It shows their creative skills and communication skills,"* explains Amy.

The most common method of involving children in recruitment is the 'parallel panel approach' where candidates are interviewed by an adult panel and by a panel of children and young people. Prior to the interview the children work with a staff member to explore the job description and person specification. They are encouraged to identify particular skills or knowledge which they believe are needed for the post and on which they can test prospective candidates.

It is important that at **the start of each recruitment process, the children know what is required of them, what their role is, and what influence they will have on the outcome of the recruitment process.** This ensures that the children feel valued and respected throughout their involvement.

During the children's interview panel, the adult who facilitated the process is present but their role and function is always clear to the children, *"the adults give support, but do not tell us what to do, they are there for practical issues such as the time keeping of the interview"*. The adult will also make sure policies around confidentiality and equality and diversity are respected.

"Quite often the adult and the young people's panel share the same ideas about the people we interview. The adult panels often say we have found out information they needed too", says Amy. But disagreements are welcomed. They provide an opportunity for further discussion and debate between the panels, and requiring all those involved to question how they have arrived at their conclusions. According to Morgan, *"We can dig deeper and get to know sides of candidates the adults don't see. Adults don't truly know what children and young people think unless they ask and involve us. They don't see what we see and they can learn from us"*.

For example, in the Gloucester Participation Project, young people shared in the decision-making process regarding recruitment of a number of part-time staff. *"The adults liked all of them, but they listened to us and the ones we*

didn't like weren't recruited in the end".

Staff involved in the recruitment process and prospective candidates both value the children's input. According to one Local Authority Service Manager *"the feedback [of the young people's panel] made a difference. The young people complemented the adult panel and added a view about the candidates' personality. They fed back whether or not they would have them as a social worker".*

A candidate for the post of Service Director within Gloucestershire Health Services gave this assessment: *"I found the young people's panel was very professional and a good example of participation. It is a clear reminder of what the job you are applying for is all about".*

Sharing power between adults and children

Recruitment is a real opportunity to share power and decision making between adults and children. It benefits service users, staff, and the wider organisation – and helps make better choices. This is reinforced by Amy, *"for example, we interviewed Rachel, a staff member now working directly with us, for her position, and we are very happy with her".* Morgan adds, *"if young people are involved, personnel work better with young people".* **In five to ten years time all staff will have been recruited with the involvement of children and young people.**

All children and young people who use the services of Action for Children have the chance to be involved. And after each recruitment process the children and young people can evaluate their achievement, which, according to Mark is always very positive: *"children like to have done something new and different and they are often rewarded at the end of the process by doing something fun together to celebrate their achievements".* Amy explains what the children have gained: *"it gives you skills, a motivation to do other things. I learned from it and it gives us more confidence. It gives a boost for life and we are proud of what we do. Every child and young person should have the chance to be involved. It gives us skills we'll use in life and gives us one step ahead".*

"Participation is not a 'mystical art', but something we should do every day. Children should be encouraged to speak up and be listened to on issues that concern them", says Mark.

The **definition of participation used by Action for Children is:** *"we believe participation is the active involvement of children and young people in experiences, opportunities and decisions that affect their lives and their ability to fulfil their potential".*

Spreading the word

Action for Children is committed to ensuring that all staff 'learn and share' their participation practice. They organise training days, annual participation seminars and produce specialist training resources such as '*The Right Choice*' guide to recruitment. Work is currently underway to train young people to deliver Right Choice recruitment training alongside adults to staff across the organisation.

In Gloucestershire, Amy and Morgan were supported by Action for Children to become '*participation trainers*', delivering training to other organisations across the county. They have developed session plans and designed workshops to explain what participation is and how the involvement of children and young people can be improved and developed.

Case study

Empowering children to share their views and opinions

Case study from FEDAIA, Federation of Child Care and Education Organisations, Catalonia, Spain - *Interview with Mariló Aneas, Centre Esclat Bellvitge (member organisation FEDAIA)*

Participation helps strengthen children's self-confidence

Children sometimes find it difficult to make their own decisions, or when it comes to expressing their own opinion, they are often influenced by what their peers or adults think. This project aimed to help children talk about what is important to them as individuals, and to strengthen children's sense of identity and self-confidence. It also worked on group dynamics, helping children communicate within a group and arrive at joint decisions.

"*Y tú qué opinas?* (And what do you think?)" is a project lead by FEDAIA to gather first-hand information on the needs and wishes of children and young people – in particular those at risk of social exclusion. They have developed dynamic visual material and guidance that professionals working with children across the region can use to engage directly with children and young people.

The **Centre Esclat-Bellvitge** is one such centre working with these participatory approaches. Based in an area of Barcelona with high levels of immigration, the centre provides free time activities to children and young people designed to promote social inclusion. They also organise a wide range of services and programmes ranging from family and parenting



F E D A I A
(Federation of Child Care and Education Organisations) is a non-profit organization, representing over 10,000 children, teenagers and their families who are at risk of social exclusion or in situations of abandonment in Catalonia (Spain). FEDAIA members include a large number of social initiative organisations throughout Catalonia.

FEDAIA aims to improve the quality of life for children, young people and their families in Catalonia; to defend their rights and welfare through representation; to improve the professionalism and quality of care and to respond effectively to changing needs. The direct involvement on children, young people and their families is an important underlying principle of their work.

support and child care, to vocational courses and job guidance.

In this particular project, children of different ages who attend the after-school clubs engaged in different creative activities designed to help them express themselves as regards what is important to them.

According to Mariló Aneas, who works at the centre, *“the children worked a lot on the subject of their rights. We wanted to ensure they understood their rights and could express whether these rights were really implemented or not. We tried to find out what complaints they had and if there was anything we could do to help”*.

Involving younger children as well as youngsters

Different age groups of children were involved in the project. For children aged 3 to 7, the project made use of puppets, role plays, drawings, films and videos to help the children express their opinions and needs. Some of the children dressed-up as adults to talk about their relationships with different professionals or within the family. As Mariló stressed: *“It is important to take enough time to work with very young children as it takes longer for them to understand the purpose of the activity”*.

For the older children (up to 16), the project made use of audiovisual material, graffiti drawings and hip-hop music. Some of the young people were encouraged to find certain information by surfing the net. *“It’s important to make the activities fun to motivate young people to get involved. Graffiti and hip-hop are very popular and it’s easier to reach young people by offering these types of activities”* says Mariló.

Important for children to feel equal

Many of the children coming to the Centre Esclat Bellvitge face social or economic disadvantage or family difficulties. Some children are referred to the project by social services. However, an important aspect of this project is that it is open to all children. *“It is enriching for the children to work in an environment where everyone can participate and everyone is equal”*, says Mariló. Each group involved around 10 to 15 children or young people, and an



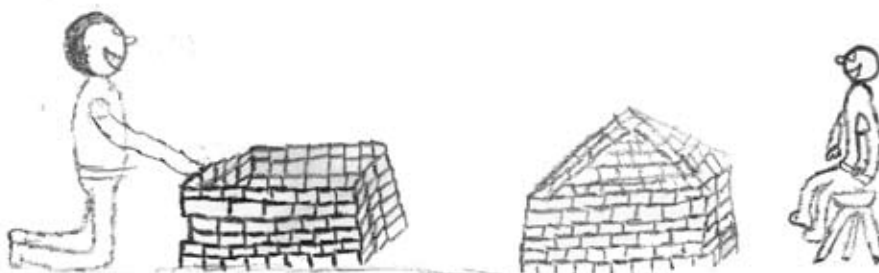
important aspect of the work was how to communicate in a group, how to respect other opinions, and how to make decisions in a group. The children had a lot of autonomy in choosing what topics should be discussed in the group, although adults supported the activities.

"Participation is something that evolves through the work we do, it has long term positive results. It is difficult to see an immediate result". A key long-term objective, however, is that the children become more autonomous and more confident to express themselves freely, as many of the children face difficulties in expressing what they think and feel.

Mariló also highlighted the importance of celebrating the children's achievements: *"At the end of the project we organised a party with the children. The youngest prepared a theatre performance which was difficult but they thoroughly enjoyed presenting it to the public."*

Chapter 3

Participation and improving policies



Introduction

Addressing the balance of power

by **Gerison Lansdown**

Gerison Lansdown is an international children's rights consultant who has published and lectured widely on children's rights, including on children's and young people's participation. She was actively involved in the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

A history of silencing children

We are witnessing a slow but profound change across the European Union. Prior to the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the UN General Assembly, 20 years ago, children were virtually invisible as spokespeople, social activists, advocates, campaigners and policy analysts. Insofar as governments took notice, it was to do things 'for' children – to provide education, protection and health care, to impose discipline, punishment and control. Childhood was a period of investment en route to adult citizenship. Rarely, if ever, were children afforded an opportunity to influence the laws, policies, services and resources which impact on their lives. They were defined exclusively as recipients not contributors.

The CRC challenge to traditional attitudes to children

The CRC, ratified by every member of the EU, challenges this relationship between adults and children, insisting that children are entitled to be involved in decisions that affect them at every level of their lives. It necessitated a profound review of the traditional approach towards children, demanding recognition that they are actors with both the capacity and entitlement to be involved in processes which determine how their lives are lived. Unsurprisingly, this presented a huge challenge. There were no blueprints on how to collaborate with children and young people as partners. Accordingly, the past 20 years have been a period of huge experimentation, necessitating the creation of new models of engagement, the questioning and challenging of assumptions, and establishing different forms of practice. Both Funky Dragon in Wales and the Cypriot Children's Parliament, described in this chapter, are illustrative of some of the many innovative examples, from all over the region, of children developing their own forums and networks through which to influence government policy. And as they clearly demonstrate, children and young people can have a significant impact. In the

case of the Cypriot Parliament, their advocacy led to school improvements to enhance disability access and change practice with regard to punishment in schools. In Wales, the children were successful in establishing complaints mechanisms in schools.

Learning and applying the lessons to date

A steep learning curve has been involved – for NGOs, politicians, professionals working with children, civil servants, children and young people themselves. However, while progress has been made, there is still a mountain to climb before it could be claimed that all countries in the EU are respecting the right of all children to be heard in all matters affecting them. If we are to climb that mountain, we need to learn from the key lessons that have emerged from initiatives like Funky Dragon and the Cypriot Children’s Parliament.

First, process is as important as outcome. It is not enough for adults to decide to create an opportunity through which children can get engaged - children themselves must be actively involved from the outset in the creation of the structures and systems through which they can be heard.

Second, adults need to recognise the extent to which they have to change their behaviour and practice in their relationships with children. The presumption both of the incompetence of children, and the belief that, as adults, we know best, is deeply ingrained, invariably misplaced and gets in the way of respecting children’s right to be heard.

Third, it is imperative that spaces are created where children can explore and identify their own agendas and concerns, and take action to address them.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we need to move beyond short term initiatives and projects, and towards institutionalised structures which begin to address the balance of power at all levels of society. Children must be afforded direct and sustained access to policy-makers in order to be able to influence their decisions, and hold them accountable. Without such access, children’s concerns, perspectives and proposals will invariably remain peripheral and marginalised. The two case studies elaborated in this chapter offer examples of how that access can be established and maintained.

Case study

Putting children's rights into practice in Cyprus

Case Study from the Cypriot Children's Parliament, Cyprus - Interview with Ninetta Kazantzis (member of the Pancyprian Parliamentary Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children), Anna-Maria (16 years old), Anthoulla (13 years old) and two facilitators listened in.

The most important reason for founding the Cypriot Children's Parliament was to promote children's rights in Cyprus. The themes which are discussed by the Children's Parliament come out of plenary discussions, from current issues at stake in Cyprus, or specific events. For example, as a result of a marathon organised to raise awareness on the rights of disabled people, the Children's Parliament organised a special session on disabled children, focusing among other things, on the rights of disabled children in schools and whether their rights are respected. Themes can also be suggested by the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC) which supports the Children's Parliament, or another organisation. For example, refugees are on the agenda of the Parliament in June 2010 following a suggestion of the UNHCR, - a theme also supported by the 2010 EU year against poverty and social exclusion.

Facts and Figures on the Cypriot Children's Parliament



The Parliament has 70 seats of which 24 are reserved for Turkish Cypriots, but currently only the seats of the Greek Cypriots are taken. Children involved in the Parliament are aged from 12 to 18 years. The Parliament has existed since 2001 and meets in plenary session every 2 months.

".. the Cyprus Children's Parliament should function throughout the year as a permanent institution with the basic aim of the active, collective participation of children in decision making, using all the legal means and procedures at their disposal", (Preamble to the Statutes of the Cyprus Children's Parliament)

The Cypriot Children's Parliament is divided into **five districts**, in the same way as the national (adult) parliament. Each district is allocated a topic agreed in the plenary session. The district meetings then prepare a

resolution on the topic and arguments to support the resolution, which is voted on in the plenary session. The Cypriot Children's Parliament meets every two months. The district meetings take place once or twice a month depending on the subject to be discussed.

At the same time, children meeting in the districts are divided into groups, such as groups for raising awareness on children's rights; the events committee; the cultural committee. The districts are responsible for these groups.

Resolutions are adopted when the majority of the Children's Parliament are in favour. Adopted resolutions automatically go to the national (adult) parliament, and the PCCWPC ensures that the most important resolutions are put on the agenda. For example, the call for a children's ombudsperson came from the children. Two years ago the first children's ombudsperson was installed, which was a big success for the children's parliament.

Members of the children's parliament are primarily elected by their peers at school

Every two years children are elected for the children's parliament. There are 56 permanent Greek Cypriot members and three ethnic minority representatives. Next to the permanent members there are substitute members to replace children who are unable to attend.

The majority of the children are elected in school. A small group of children who do not attend school can also take part. The PCCWPC carries out this selection by posting leaflets in places where such children go to, asking children to nominate themselves. One of the child parliamentarians has come from this group of children who do not attend school. According to Anna-Maria and Anthoulla, all children at schools have equal chances to participate. For example, children with disabilities are in mainstream education and are also able to take part. There is no discrimination of any children.

The children involved in the Parliament cannot be older than 18. Children are elected for 2 years and can be re-elected for a second term, unless they turn 18 within the next 2 years. However, many 16 and 17 year olds stay involved and provide support to the new members of the Children's Parliament, which is perceived to be a very positive sign. A child must be at least 12 to be elected to the Parliament, but the views of younger children are often sought through consultations.

Children take the initiative to gather relevant information

The children need to gather the information on the themes they discuss. Whilst they can get advice from the facilitators, they have to ask for data or information from the relevant sources such as government, NGOs or Universities. They also use surveys to collect information. For example, for a conference on children with disabilities they conducted a survey among parents of disabled children, teachers and the community as a whole which generated an excellent response.

Each district has two facilitators to support the children, most of them trained youth workers. They are trained to work with the children in the Children's Parliament, especially regarding how to encourage children to express themselves and to listen to each other. According to Anna-Maria and Anthoulla, *"our facilitators help us to guide the discussions and write the reports. They know more than we do!"*. If there is any problem, the children first go to their facilitator, but they can also raise issues with PCCWPC or the Cypriot Children's Ombudsperson.

At district level, the children have to find their own meeting place. The plenary sessions take place in the House of Parliament, in Nicosia or Limassol or another place in Cyprus. The seating in the Children's Parliament is similar to that of the adult parliament - the President of each district has his/her own seat and the President of the Children's Parliament sits next to the President of the House of Parliament.

Some important successes, but children want more

The Cypriot Children's Parliament's biggest success was the establishment of an ombudsman for children in Cyprus. They also saw a change in policy from the Ministry of Education after they gave their input on the issue of punishment in schools.

However, the children are disappointed by the level of feedback on their resolutions: *"The Pancyprrian Committee informs us on what happens in the National Parliament, but we would like the people who are going to take the decisions to give us feedback on what they do with our resolutions"*.



Nonetheless the children really value the experience: *"It is a nice experience and a chance to participate and we do have a chance to learn and do new things". "What is important: we can express ourselves freely and we can exchange ideas and develop our own personalities with the help of others"*.

The children do not formally evaluate the activities of the Parliament, but at each session of the district meetings they discuss the outcomes of the plenary sessions. The PCCWPC also carries out an internal evaluation of the functioning of the children's parliament every year.

According to one of the facilitators, *"the children willingly work really hard - we are just there to facilitate their work. It is like a breath of fresh air when you listen to the children and how well they express the needs and demands of society"*.

Case study

Welsh children get heard by the UN Committee on the rights of the child

Case Study from the Funky Dragon, Wales, United Kingdom - Interview with Darren Bird, Chief Executive of Funky Dragon, and contributions from You Tube video 'The Our Rights Our Story Presentation at Geneva' by Christopher Gibbins (age 17), Rebecca Harries (age 18) and Benjamin Sawyers (age 15).

Facts and Figures on Funky Dragon



Funky Dragon is the Children's and Young People's Assembly for Wales and was established in 2004. Its main aim is to provide an opportunity for 0-25 years old children and young people to get their voices heard on issues that affect them. It is a young people led organisation. Funky

Dragon is a way for young people in Wales to speak directly to the Welsh Assembly Government and other policy-makers.

Most of Funky Dragon's work is focussed on Wales, and it has concentrated particularly on its work with disadvantaged and vulnerable children in Wales. In 2006 the young people started to work on an alternative report to the UN Committee on CRC "to tell the UN all the good stuff we did in Wales", says Ben (15).

Children's own report on children's rights

Every five years, state parties which have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (every country in the world except the USA and Somalia) have to report on progress to the UN Committee. For children in Wales, it was really important that their views were presented in a separate alternative report to the Committee. "Hopefully the Committee will be more clear on what rights I have got and the rights that children have", said Chris (17), one of the three children that went to Geneva to present the views of Welsh children. The other children were Rebecca (18) and Ben (15).

When the young people started to prepare for their report to the UNCRC

Committee they initially wanted to work on all its Articles. However, not all issues are important to children in Wales, and some Articles, such as the one on abducted children, they agree on and have nothing to say. The young people therefore chose four themes: **education, participation, information, and health**. Specific interests of young people – such as those of disabled children - were woven into all four themes. Four other areas of specific concern to Welsh young people were also chosen: culture, environment, leisure and transport.

Before embarking on their alternative report, representatives of Funky Dragon visited Brussels, and young people from the "*What do you Think?*" project set up by UNICEF Belgium, which involved a steering group of 50 young people aged 13 to 18. They shared their experience of submitting an alternative report to the UN Committee. Several project workers were appointed by Funky Dragon to work with the young people, and the Grand Council set up a steering group to work on the UN report. "*From the moment we joined, we worked on it ever since*", said Rebecca.

Representatives in the Grand Council are chosen for two years. "*They are not encouraged to go for a second term - the young people that established Funky Dragon thought that after two years you might become 'corrupt', meaning you start to agree with the government and their reason or excuses for not achieving things such as time or money!*", explains Darren. However a small minority of children are elected for two terms. The young people are not all elected at the same time, which ensures the continuity of the Council and the children learn how to hand over their knowledge to newly elected children.

Structure of Funky Dragon

The **Grand Council is made up of 100 young people, aged from 11 to 25 years of age**. Wales is composed of 22 local authorities, and in each local authority a local youth forum is active, which elects four representatives who will have a seat in the General Council of Funky Dragon. They are chosen for two years.

The representatives are elected from four categories:

- the voluntary sector, e.g. scouts, local charities;
- the statutory sector, e.g. youth clubs, schools, social services;
- school councils - which are obligatory are in all primary and secondary schools in Wales;
- equality - referring to eight groups of disadvantaged children including disabled children, ethnic minorities, gay, homeless, looked-after, etc.

Darren Bird, "*The last category is represented with more than 25%, since children from the other categories can also be from a minority or be gay*".

Consulting more than 10,000 Welsh children

In January 2007 young people began a national survey, workshops and interviews to gather information directly from children. **More than 10,000 children were involved** in the survey, which was carried out in school assembly settings, where the questions were explained and the children could vote with a remote control system. Workshops were also organised on different themes to gather information directly from children and young people and one-to-one interviews were carried out with a group of 11-18 year olds from specific interest groups. The gender balance of the children involved was roughly 50:50.

From July to October the data collected from 11 to 18 year olds were analysed and written up into a report **"Our Rights, Our Story"**. Another research project was carried out with younger children, aged 7 to 10, which resulted in the report **"Why do people's ages go up and not down?"**

Getting children's voices heard

Three representatives were selected to present the report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva. *"Not many young people go to give evidence to the UN, but we know best what to present"*, said Rebecca. *"The issues we have raised at the UN included the need to combat bullying, since almost half of all children are bullied and the need to have enough space to play for children, since 96% of the children want a green place to play"*, said Ben.

Rebecca raised the issue of the limited access to information on the UNCRC *"the majority of my friends do not know about the UNCRC"*. The three Welsh representatives found the best part of their trip to Geneva was the informal session with the children, when they had the opportunity to talk on a one-to-one basis with UN representatives and Ministers, *"I went in and brought my voice across"*, said Chris. *"The two main recommendations we raised with the UN Committee were to have compulsory teaching of the UNCRC at all schools and a check of anti-bullying policy at schools"*, said Ben.



Mixed impact of children's participation on their lives and policies affecting them

"What I got personally out of the whole reporting process to the UN is more knowledge on the UNCRC and being able to speak to officials without being nervous anymore, and knowing my opinion does matter", said Rebecca.

For Chris it had been more than just a report: *"being involved from the beginning has changed me as a person"*.

Ben was even more dramatic and talked about the whole process when he said that, *"it's a lot of work but it is worth it"* and about the hearing he said *"we've done all the work, this is crunch time, get in there and do your best"*.

In 2009, a full audit by the Welsh Assembly was carried out on the functioning of Funky Dragon's children's participation work. Personal development and self-esteem came out as top achievements for the children. The second achievement was policy change, such as ensuring children's right to complain in schools. However, as Darren points out *"there are always issues you can achieve and others you cannot, but it gives the young people a real perception of politicians and their work"*.

The Welsh Assembly reacted to Funky Dragon's reports to the UN in its report of November 2008 *"The Right Way Forward"* and stated the positive partnership they have built with Funky Dragon in Wales. Following the UN Committee's Concluding Observations for the UK in 2008, the Welsh government adopted an Action Plan for Children in February 2010 and is now working on a children's rights law.

Darren commented that the kids have a good relationship with the Welsh Children's Commissioner, who they know personally, which helped them when they were bringing their points across at the UN in Geneva.

When working with the Welsh government the young people worked with other groups in partnership. For example, when a child is in the care system all their personal belongings are put in a bin bag, so the young people asked for more dignity and respect for these children, and they did so in cooperation with other NGOs. Another example of cooperation with other NGOs is homophobic bullying, which was included by the government in its anti-bullying policy for schools.

"The UN report was a nice thing to do, but I'm not convinced of its effectiveness. The Concluding Observations are for the four nations in the UK and are formulated in such a diplomatic language that they do not actually have much punch", states Darren Bird. Even the 'rapporteur' of the UN

Committee for the UK was unsurprised that the young people were not happy with the outcomes in the Concluding Observations. They are not always satisfied with the outcomes of their inputs to the government - *"results are mixed and depend on whether they effect the children"*, says Darren.

The activities of Funky Dragon are evaluated continuously and at the end of each two year period. When the children have participated in Funky Dragon activities they receive a *"qualification certificate"*, which acknowledges their voluntary participation and the hours they have contributed. When children have been in the Grand Council for two years they receive a statue of the Funky Dragon, which is given during an official ceremony, often by a Minister or a celebrity. This is a very special experience for the children.

Chapter 4

Participation and Peer Support



Introduction

Respecting the rights of children in care institutions promotes citizenship

by **Natália Fernandes**

Natália Fernandes, PhD is based at the University of Minho - University of Child Education Sciences, Braga, Portugal. She has published research particularly on the situation of children living in residential care, consequent neglect and abuse, and children's right to participate.

The institutionalisation of children and young people, driven by complex social and family circumstances, has not always respected children as right-holders, and in some cases even generates situations of neglect and abuse (Durning, 1998). According to this author, one of the reasons that might lead to abuse in institutions is the fact that many of them operate as autocratic and self-sufficient systems behind closed doors and with hierarchical management. As such, they do not promote open and close relationships with children and young people, which might lead to feelings of fear and insecurity amongst children.

Research has showed that some children experiencing institutionalisation might be more vulnerable to social exclusion, as argued by Ridge et al. (2000). These authors consider children in institutions to be at high risk of loneliness, to lack social support as they move towards independence, and to have their autonomy and participation skills severely limited by the institutionalisation process.

The organisational structure of care institutions, favouring the silence and isolation of children and young people in care, might therefore be a major obstacle towards the recognition of children as active citizens with their own opinions as regards the environments in which they live in and their daily lives, as argued by Fernandes (2009). It might create an environment in which children are constantly subjected to pre-established rules, so they remain unaware that they are entitled to make themselves heard and have the right to be listened to. Similarly, children in this context often learn that they are not permitted to voice their concerns, except perhaps in relation to peer relationships.

Yet against this framework, there are cases which demonstrate how children and young people can be the protagonists of their own lives. One way in which they do so is by making up symbolic environments of protection, such as the setting of 'family' groups inside the institution, in which a particular group of children are included but which are recognised by all the other children. The 'family groups' were organised by the children without adult participation, and they were created to form a 'family', as a strategy both to protect themselves and to give them a sense of belonging.

It is therefore extremely important to share good practices which reveals other possibilities for organising life within care institutions, based on participatory principles, mutual support, cooperation and partnership, and on dialogue and intervention, which are fundamental mechanisms for promoting the active citizenship of children and young people.

In the case study presented here we are able to acknowledge how young people, from a formally established dynamic process – a Youth Council – build citizenship competences in a care institution.

The Council has a practical focus, as children use it for seeking out resources relevant to their lives, which enables them to secure access to the internet, child-friendly institutional rules and improved visitor relations. However, the Youth Council is also a space where they build negotiation competencies, develop their own identity and also learn how to relate with others effectively. From their interaction with other children and with adults, children build their own citizenship competencies, proving that it is possible for citizenship to take place in institutionalisation settings.

References

Durning, P. (1998), "*Toute institution accueillant et soignant des enfants est-elle potentiellement maltraitante?*", in Marceline Gabel, Frédéric Jésus et Michel Manciaux (orgs.), *Maltraitements institutionnelles: accueillir et soigner les enfants sans les maltraiter*, Paris: Éditions Fleurus, 71-87.

Fernandes, N., (2009), *Childhood and Rights: Social representations, Practices and Powers*, Porto: Edições Afrontamento.

Ridge, T., Millar J. (2000), "Excluding Children: Autonomy, Friendship and the Experience of the Care System", *Social Policy & Administration*, 34(2), 160-175.

Case Study

Children in youth care institution trained by their peers to set up youth council

Case Study from the Dutch National Youth Council, The Netherlands -

Interviews were carried out with Willemijn Phielix, Youth Trainer at DNYC (Dutch National Youth Council) (25); Cato Oosterwijk, Project Worker in Youth Policy and Youth Care at DNYC (26); Ivo (16) and Stephan (15), members of a youth council at a youth care institution; and Ton van der Gaag (Policy Adviser at the youth care institution).

In the Netherlands, the Dutch National Youth Council (DNYC) trains children and young people in youth care institutions to set up youth councils within their own institutions. Ivo (16) and Stephan (15) who live in a closed youth care institution for boys aged 10-18 in the Netherlands, have taken part in DNYC training courses and have been members of the youth council in the institution where they live.

Ivo has been living in the institution since November 2009 and Stephan has lived there for two years. Ivo says, *"the environment is not perfect to live in"* and it was not their choice to live there. The court has ordered them to live at the institution and to receive the appropriate care. The aim of the institution is to re-integrate the boys back into society. The youth council help the boys represent the interests of all the boys in the institution, increases their self-esteem. It also teaches them to socialize and reach compromises with others in order to find solutions and have their needs met more effectively.

Willemijn (25) has been trained by DNYC to train the boys in the institution. Her own training took five years and she emphasises that Article 12 of the UNCRC is the basis of their work.

Young residents need to be motivated to join the Youth Council

One of the challenges for youth councils in juvenile justice and closed youth institutions is that young people are only here for a limited period – resulting in a high turnover of council representatives. In the institution where Ivo and Stephan live, only four boys are currently members of the Youth Council.

The other boys have left the institution. New members are selected by the boys who are already members of the Council. *"There is a lot of interest from the boys here to become a member, but they first have to participate in a meeting and show that they are motivated to take part in the debates and turn up regularly, otherwise we don't want them",* says Ivo.

Cato, project worker at DNYC says *"I believe young people join a Youth Council because it's fun and because of the combination of learning and achieving"*.



The Dutch National Youth Council's mission (DNYC and in Dutch: NJR) is to foster youth participation. This umbrella organisation of Dutch youth organisations gives young people (aged 12-30 years) the opportunity to show who they are and what abilities they have, whether in their local community or at the UN in New York. The Council (NJR) gives governmental bodies and other organisations advice on youth policy. NJR is

a peer-led organisation and its Board members are aged 21-22 years old.

The Youth Council meets every week on Thursday. On Monday they have a weekly opening session for all boys in the institution (sixty in total) to raise issues they want discussed by the youth council. *"During the rest of the week I go to all the units where the boys live, work or go to school to check what they need, to have group discussions and then take this to the Youth Council meeting",* says Ivo.

"An agenda is prepared for each meeting and normally includes two main themes and one subtheme to be discussed, including the time we can spend discussing each issue", explains Ivo. The themes are always about the boys' own experiences in the institution and the need for improvements. The Youth Council meeting is attended by the young people and two teachers from the institute. Once per month someone from the management attends as well, which is much appreciated by the boys, because they can then report back directly on what needs to be changed. It is important that the staff acknowledge the capabilities of the boys and in this institution they listen seriously to what the children have to say.

Cato says, *"from my own experience I can tell that these youngsters can discuss any subject with you, as long as you are approaching the other as equal, explaining well and are not judging"*.

Youngsters learn to negotiate and compromise

"Our peers in the institution often say, "what's the use of having the Youth Council and why do you spend your time on it?" Then I confront them: "How do you think we managed to get a television in each bedroom? We can really achieve changes!"

"We have achieved several things, such as an internet cafe, where we can have internet access for a few hours per day", points out Stephan. "One of the big issues we achieved was to have a television in each of the boys' rooms, but we had to fight very hard for it", says Ivo. It was really important for the young people not to always have to sit in the common living room, but to have their own choice about what to watch and to have more privacy.

"Youth councils in other youth care institutions have fought for different changes and achieved child-friendly explanations of institution rules, sports equipment and improved visitor regulations, for example. The time for parents to visit their children now starts from the moment they see their child and does not include the time they spend to go along security checks", explains Cato from DNYC.

Ivo and Stephan have learned through their training how to develop arguments to convince the management. For example, Ivo calculated savings the boys could make on weekend train tickets. These savings were then used for weekend activities for those boys who do not go on leave.



Photo: Remco Bohle

"I do not accept a 'no' from the staff working here and always try to convince them with good arguments", he said. They learn to find compromises, such as in the case of the internet cafe - which is open for a few hours per day which is much better than no internet access at all.

Ivo and Stephan talk very enthusiastically about being members of the Youth Council, *"it is nice to have Youth Council meetings, as long as they do not take too long", says Stephan. They are both satisfied with the outcomes of the meetings and the results they have achieved already, "otherwise we would no longer be part of it".*

Only young people can become trainers

"Together with other volunteers I train young people in closed youth care institutions in debating and in setting up youth councils", says Willemijn Phielix (25), Youth Trainer at DNYC. "The boys and girls I train are in closed youth care or juvenile justice institutions because they have committed a crime or because they have a behavioural disorder."

Why is Willemijn, a law student, spending her free time giving these training sessions? *"I believe it is really cool to see how young people are opening up and feel free to share their views. We are young and understand much better what the young people mean than adults. At the end of a training day there are always several boys and girls who feel proud of themselves, which gives me an enormous boost!"*

All trainers are selected by DNYC: *"you need to be maximum 18-23 years old when you start, be interested and have some experience as a trainer",* explains Cato from the NJR. The trainers receive a two-day training course focussing both on the nature of youth councils - what is it and how can you make it exciting and fun to do - and about how to relate with the target group of young delinquents and young people with behavioural problems: *"What are your prejudices and how to deal with these?". "When working with these young people in care they continuously serve as a 'mirror' for you. You need to be confident to work with them".*

The objective of setting up youth councils is *"to train young people to formulate and express their opinions and to empower them and make them feel proud of themselves".*

It is a legal requirement in the Netherlands that Youth Care and Juvenile Justice Institutions have a Youth Council. The number of institutes inviting DNYC to help set up a council has increased every year. Despite this positive development, some councils are still waiting to be embedded in the organisational structure of the institutions.

"Directors need our encouragement to make time to listen to or join a debate with youngsters about current world affairs and daily matters affecting them. Unfortunately, some seem hesitant to join. Those that do join are always surprised about the high level of debating and impressed with the young people forming a council and assisting in policymaking. Every institute that we have visited has invited us back for debating or advanced participation trainings or requested advice on participation-policy" explains Cato.

Peer-2-peer training benefits both sides

Cato explains that the young people participating in the training courses are selected by the staff of the institution, based on willingness and experience. They all participate on a voluntary basis.

A training day on youth councils begins straight away with input from the youngsters. After firstly getting to know one another and an explanation of the purpose of the day, the first question asked is, *"why is it important to be in a youth council?"* The boys react by stating that is about respect for each other and raising issues. Everything is noted down and at the end of the session, the boys react to this with disbelief *"wow, did we say that?"*. It clearly shows them the values underpinning a youth council.

After the training session there is always feedback on what went well. *"Most of the boys in the institution are 'streetwise' and gained their life experience on the street. They immediately feel if your intentions are genuine or fake"*. The young trainers work only with positive feedback: what went well and if things did not go well, what can we learn from the experience.

During the process of setting up a youth council, both the young people in the youth care institution and the young trainers develop themselves and gain new experience: *"It is about becoming conscious of your own capabilities and becoming an ambassador for young people in closed youth care institutions"*, says Willemijn.

Ivo and Stephan participated in several training sessions given by Willemijn, which not only focussed on setting up a youth council, but also on how to run youth council meetings and the effective division of tasks and responsibilities. In the Youth Council in which Ivo and Stephan participate there is a Chair, a Co-Chair and someone who takes notes. Ivo learned in the last training course that they are representing all the boys in the institution and how they can best fulfill this responsibility.

At the end of a training day all the young people who participate receive a certificate from DNYC. *"It is great to take part in DNYC training days because it gives you a new experience and it is nice to receive a certificate for it"*, says Ivo.

Conclusions and recommendations



Conclusions

These varied case studies from across Europe demonstrate that all children and young people - **including disadvantaged and excluded children - have the potential to participate** in decisions affecting their lives. Whether it concerns local, regional or national policies affecting them or services directly used by them, children's voices need to be heard, as is underlined by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - the right of the child to be heard.

The case studies show that there are **no fixed processes or methods** which must be used in order to involve children and young people. The processes described vary from national and regional children's parliaments; children involved in recruitment processes for service providers; children trained to set up youth councils in child care institutions and children involved in processes to improve their living conditions and realize their dreams when they live on the margins of society, whether dropping out of school or work. However, **standards and guidelines exist for meaningful participation**, as is shown by the case studies outlined by Eurochild.

"We believe participation is the active involvement of children and young people in experiences, opportunities and decisions that affect their lives and their ability to fulfill their potential," (Action for Children, UK).

All children involved in the case studies in this book have indicated that participation is fun or cool and they all take part on a **voluntary basis**. They talk about it in an enthusiastic way and feel that they are listened to and that their opinions matter.

Equally, adults having worked directly with children and young people consider their ideas and views to be very valuable: *"it is like **a breath of fresh air when you listen to the children** and how well they express the needs and demands of our society"*, says a facilitator who works with children in the Cypriot Children's Parliament.

The case studies have shown that when children's opinions and views are taken into consideration, **policies and services** affecting them will often change in a positive way and become more child-friendly. When children and young people realize that they can achieve changes they are motivated to participate in decisions affecting their lives and living circumstances.

The participation of disadvantaged children and young people can contribute to a new understanding of child poverty and social exclusion and these

fresh perceptions can enable us to **identify more effective measures to combat poverty and social exclusion**. The case studies from Action for Children (UK), FEDAIA (Spain), KREM (Norway), UNICEF (Belgium) and the Dutch National Youth Council and child care institutions in the Netherlands have demonstrated that all services, including those working with the most disadvantaged or damaged children and young people can develop participatory activities.

It is **important and productive to involve vulnerable and disadvantaged young people** in decisions about what they need and how services should be delivered. This ensures that not only well-educated and motivated children and young people who are easily accessible have a say about services and policies relevant to their lives. Although it is often more time consuming and resource intensive to involve the most vulnerable children and young people, the outcomes for both their personal development and life circumstances are often positive. As is indicated in several of the case studies, the involvement of this group of children only results in more effective services and policies for them and is therefore cost efficient.

The **process of children's participation is as important as the outcomes**: it gives children and young people and particularly disadvantaged children **self-esteem**. It also gives them confidence and they learn how to express their opinions using clear arguments and how to listen to each other. **Participatory activities need to be adapted to the changing circumstances** for young participants, whose home circumstances, health and wellbeing may change dramatically through the course of the work.

Children do not only learn from participation activities and achieve changes to policies and services, but several case studies have shown that the children have also learned about their rights, such as those involved with Funky Dragon in Wales and FEDAIA in Spain. These children believe that it is important that all **children learn about their rights** as these are described in the UN CRC.

The case studies from the Dutch National Youth Council and KREM in Norway show that children and young people feel more comfortable when they **work with other young people** or adults who have gone through the same experience. They can identify with them more easily.

"Adults don't truly know what children and young people think unless they ask and involve us. They don't see what we see and they can learn from us" (Morgan, 12 years old, UK).

This quote clearly illustrates the **additional value children and young people's contributions can make to adults' perspectives**.

Recommendations

In Eurochild's view, child poverty and social exclusion cannot be effectively addressed without investing in children's participation. The participation of children is an essential part of the solution for several reasons:

- It helps to broaden the adult perspective, bringing new insights that can improve adults' decision-making;
- It is a legal right articulated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by all EU member states;
- It acknowledges children as subjects of rights rather than objects of protection. It emphasises children's own agency and individual potential;
- It empowers children, giving them a greater sense of self-worth and identity. It helps children articulate their views and experiences and can transform negative experiences into a positive resource;
- It develops children's communication, negotiation and listening skills. It can help teach children a broad range of 'life-skills' necessary for self-fulfillment.

However, to realise its full potential, children's participation must move beyond tokenism. To genuinely hear, understand and respond to children's views and experiences, far-reaching changes are required at all different levels of policy making and implementation.

Recommendations for EU level action on children's participation

- ➔ EU cooperation on child poverty and social exclusion must create a space for understanding how children and young people themselves experience poverty and social exclusion. This can be achieved by: introducing new indicators on child well-being that take account of children's subjective well-being; undertaking qualitative and quantitative surveys to collect children's views and experiences; promoting mechanisms and processes at national and regional level that involve disadvantaged children and young people in the fight against child poverty through good practice exchange and peer reviews; supporting EU level events and activities that involve children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- The EU should adopt a comprehensive, ambitious EU strategy on the rights of the child giving life to Article 3 of the Lisbon Treaty which includes protection of children's rights as an explicit objective of the European Union. An important pillar of the EU strategy must be children's participation. This will include: support for local and regional structures and organisations that can develop a genuine dialogue with and between children and young people (particularly the most disadvantaged) on policies of EU interest; development of guidelines on children's participation to help different areas of EU policy making capture children's views and experiences; development of comparable indicators that can monitor children's participation at Member State and/or regional level; production of child-friendly information and communication tools. The European Commission should build on the important work of the Council of Europe in this regard.

Recommendations for national and regional level action on children's participation

- National and regional governments should invest in participation structures that give children and young people a voice in decision making at a local, regional and national level (and potentially EU level). Such structures should be funded on a continual basis, ensuring the children have a say in how the organisation is run and what topics are chosen for discussion. Particular attention should be given to encouraging children who are less articulate or ambitious to participate.
- Training for all professionals working with children (teachers, health professionals, social workers etc.) must include training on children's participation and children's rights. It is important that professionals understand and are sensitive to the impacts of poverty and social exclusion on children, and that they are given the necessary resources to listen, and respond, to the specific needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Children should be given the opportunity to learn about their rights as laid down in the UNCRC. National and regional governments should therefore include this in school curricula. Children and young people must also be given training on how to participate, how to develop arguments, how to listen to others and how to respect other people's opinions and beliefs.

Recommendations regarding participation practices involving children and young people

- ➔ Participation must be recognised as a right not a duty. Children must be motivated to participate. This requires that they understand the purpose of their participation from the beginning and that the methods used are fun and adapted to their age, ability and interests. It is important to recognise the skills developed through children's participation, for example through award of certificates or learning points.
- ➔ Children's participation must be properly resourced. It is crucial to respect child protection measures, and ensure adequate preparation and follow-up. Children should receive feedback on the outcome of their participation. Staff and volunteers involved in supporting children's participation must be adequately trained. It is important that children's privacy is respected and that all children are treated equally and are not judged.
- ➔ Participation processes give varying levels of control and autonomy to children, ranging from activities that are entirely designed and implemented by children themselves to those largely determined by adults. Different approaches are appropriate for different circumstances. However, participation must never be used as a means of instrumentalising or manipulating children for adult goals. Every opportunity should be taken to give children's ownership and responsibility for participation processes and outcomes.

Other Eurochild publications

Family policies that work best for children - fighting child poverty & promoting child well-being. Report part I of the Family and Parenting Support Thematic Working Group study visit to Sweden and Denmark on 26-30 april 2010, September 2010

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/22vps24>

Eurochild's Policy Position - Eurochild's proposals for the development of the EU's strategy on the rights of the child, May 2010

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/2fpos97>

Eurochild's Key Messages for 2010 European year to combat poverty and social exclusion, February 2010

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/39b6kxt>

Children in Alternative Care - National Surveys - 2nd edition, January 2010

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/2g8ln2u>

Eurochild report: Impact of the financial crisis on children, October 2009

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/2ch3dm9>

Eurochild report: Ending child poverty within the EU? A review of the 2008-2010 National Strategy reports on social protection and social inclusion, February 2009

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/c9tv9s>

Eurochild report: Support for families - looking at strategies to identify, engage with and empower families most at risk of exclusion, November 2007

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/2fc97lc>

Eurochild Fact Sheet on Child Poverty in the EU, June 2007

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/26dh4co>

Eurochild report: Ending Child Poverty within the EU? A review of the 2006-08 National reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion, May 2007

Tinyurl: <http://tinyurl.com/2dwh8kz>

Valuing Children's Potential

*How children's participation contributes
to fighting poverty and social exclusion*

This publication demonstrates, through the description of concrete case studies, how children and young people can participate and get involved in decisions affecting their lives and how their participation can contribute to the fight against child poverty and social exclusion. The case studies are reinforced by the relevant research evidence of well-established experts in the field of children and young people's participation.

The case studies have been chosen as examples of good practice in children's participation. The publication has four chapters:

- Chapter 1 focuses on children's participation and their understanding of poverty. Two case studies from UNICEF Belgium and KREM (Norway) focus on what matters to children who experience poverty and social exclusion, which issues are important to them and what needs to be taken into account when developing policies to combat child poverty.
- Chapter 2 focuses on how children's participation improves services for children and young people. Action for Children in the UK involves children in the recruitment and selections processes of staff working with children; and FEDAIA in Catalonia (Spain) involves children in after-school clubs who are at risk of being socially excluded or in situations of abandonment.
- Chapter 3 focuses on how children are involved in broader policy debates which can influence policy development affecting children and young people. The Cypriot Children's Parliament has achieved improvements for children with special needs in schools and Funky Dragon in Wales has consulted more than 10,000 children when developing their alternative report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- Chapter 4 focuses on participation and peer support, using an example of how children have been trained by their peers from the Dutch National Youth Council to set up a youth council in a residential child care institution in the Netherlands.

For each case study one or more people involved in the participation process with the children have been interviewed. Where possible, children and young people involved in the participation processes have also been interviewed.



2010 BUILDING A
EUROPE FOR ALL
www.endpoverty.eu

