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## Children and Young People's Participation in Policy-Making

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# Children and young people's participation in policy-making:

## Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable

Children and young people's participation is now a common policy and practice demand. Promoted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children and young people are increasingly involved in decisions that affect them individually and as a group. This briefing addresses the latter – how children and young people are involved in decision-making, on public policy matters, such as legislation, services and community development.

In Scotland, the UK and internationally, participation activities for children and young people have proliferated over recent years. School or pupil councils have had a revival, non-governmental organisations are frequently funded to support children and young people's involvement, and governments are increasingly expected to demonstrate how they have consulted with children and young people. But with such activities have come challenges, particularly to ensure that children and young people's participation is meaningful, effective and sustainable.

### What do we mean by participation ?

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child describes participation as:  
*... ongoing processes, which include information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.*

General Comment No. 12. The Right of the Child to be Heard (2009) para 2  
<http://tinyurl.com/3mfgm23>

A Think Tank was held in June 2011, in Edinburgh Scotland, to discuss such challenges and identify ways forward. The intensive day brought together children and young people with experience of public policy participation, local and national government officials, academics and practitioners. This Briefing brings together key information and discussion from the day: looking at challenges and strengths of how children and young people are currently involved; learning from experiences in Scotland and elsewhere; and concluding with 'ways forward'. Quotations are from seminar participants.

The Think Tank was an initial step, as part of developing **Scotland's Children's Sector Forum**. This Forum mobilises an united voice among children's sector organisations to influence national policy and local practice in ways that advance the best interests of children and their families. The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at The University of Edinburgh, Barnardo's Scotland and Children in Scotland have joined together – with support from the Economic and Social Research Council – for a year-long initiative to assist the Forum in developing ways of involving children and young people in its policy-relevant work.

## Challenges

Children and young people, and those who support their participation, experience a very familiar list of challenges when they seek to influence policy:

### Tokenism

- Children and young people may be consulted, but their views have no discernible impact on decisions.
- The timetable of the policy process leaves insufficient time to involve children and young people meaningfully.

*“Participation generated cynicism among young people from continuous box-ticking”*

*“Do we respect children and young people enough?”*

**Lack of feedback.** Children and young people are asked to participate, but they do not know what has happened with their contributions.

### Who is included – or excluded

- Some children and young people risk being ‘over-consulted’, frequently asked for their views and become frustrated at the lack of subsequent action.
- Other children and young people are never reached by participation activities, as they are not in touch with the supporting organisations or forums.
- Some children and young people are only invited to participate on certain topics: for example, disabled children and young people have expressed frustration at only being consulted about issues around their disability.
- The children and young people consulted are too often presumed to be speaking on behalf of the majority of their peers, although they are not supported to be representative in this way.

*“Still pigeon-holing - everything is a young people’s issue but this is not always recognised.”*

**Consultation but not dialogue.** Children and young people are frequently consulted in one-off activities, but are not involved over time in an on-going, respectful dialogue.

**Adult processes and structures exclude children and young people.** Children and young people’s participation is not integrated into how policy decisions are made, implemented and evaluated. It is seen as a specialist activity and not a mainstream one. As a result, children and young people’s participation risks being side-lined, if their advice and recommendations counters views of other, more powerful groups.

*“Too many ‘one-offs’ activities and not enough mainstreamed.”*

**Lack of sustainability.** Children and young people’s participation is frequently supported by short term funding. As a result, supporting staff may move on, the groups dissipate and the participative process stops.

## Strengths

The Think Tank identified strengths, upon which improved practice can be built. The list includes:

**Government commitment.** It is now expected that children and young people will be involved in decision-making. Children and young people themselves increasingly expect such participation.

*“Children and young people’s participation is recognised as valuable by government.”*

**“Enthusiasm of the converted”.** An ever-growing number of practitioners, managers and policy-makers are committed to children and young people’s participation and ensure it is central to their core work.

**Creative, inclusive and productive approaches.** Children, young people and those supporting their participation have developed effective ways to work together. Children and young people have appreciated being involved early in the decision-making, rather than when decisions are nearly finalised.

**Use of technology.** This allows for inclusive, larger-scale consultations.

*“We are getting better at the amount of information we get out to young people and using appropriate and relevant media.”*

## Thinking politically about participation

Excerpt from presentation by Nigel Thomas  
Professor of Childhood and Youth Research,  
University of Central Lancashire

A lot can potentially be learned from the ways in which participation is enacted in other places, particularly in countries of the majority world where institutional and cultural contexts are very different. The following two accounts are taken from *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, which contains many examples of different ways of thinking about, and enabling, participation from around the world.

### Child reporters in Orissa

This was a project that set out to involve poor and marginalised children and young people. Groups of schoolchildren (aged 8 to 14) were trained in news reporting skills and engaged in thinking about development issues. They then returned to their villages and noted down their daily observations and thoughts in diaries, along with the views and thoughts of other children and young people. The diaries were used to produce a monthly newsletter sent to key decision-makers; later the children and young people began using post cards so that their reports could reach the district administration more quickly. Their reports have influenced decision-making. The children and young people have also been influential at a village level: for example by persuading parents to enrol children in school and putting families in touch with services. There are now more than 5,000 child reporters across Orissa (Acharya, 2010).

### Coffee growers in Nicaragua

CESESMA was founded in 1992 as an environmental education action group to promote and defend the rights of children and young people through awareness-raising, reflection and action. Harry Shier joined in 2001 and found that the experience 'revealed how narrow the concept of child participation was that I brought from my previous work in the UK' (Shier, 2010: 215). Central to CESESMA's strategy are young community education activists, who take

leadership roles in their communities. Young people are increasingly becoming elected representatives, developing their own media outlets, and taking direct action.

For the UK, these examples raise some fundamental questions. Do children and young people really participate in the processes that produce important political decisions? Do they help to set the agenda or define the terms of debate? Do children and young people as a social group effectively express their common interests? Because children are excluded from voting in parliamentary or local government elections, their engagement tends to be seen as not political. The arguments for not allowing children to vote are pretty weak, and similar to the arguments that were made in the past against widening the franchise to include working class men, and women of any class.

Perhaps it is time to recognise that children and young people's participation is a political issue, and that effective participation is likely to involve disagreement and conflict as well as harmonious dialogue. As long as children and young people's participation is something that happens in compartmentalised settings, it will make little real difference. The way forward for participation is for it to be grounded in children and young people's everyday lives in their communities, to be more embracing of risk, and to be unashamedly political.

*To read more about these and other examples, see Percy-Smith, B. and Thomas, N. (2009) A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation, London: Routledge.*

## Children can be Champions of Change – if we only give them a chance!

Excerpt from presentation by Dr Vicky Johnson  
Head of Partnerships and Programmes, ChildHope

Children have long been treated as recipients of health and education projects and have been invisible in broader international development assistance. Looking back over the past decade, despite innovative pockets of work, much rights based programming has been interpreted as giving children a 'voice' without always considering the context in which programmes are being implemented and whether anyone in positions of power is listening.

Much of my earlier work could be described as giving children and young people a 'voice', always trying to

ensure a rigorous process of collecting the perspectives of girls and boys, young men and women and involving different stakeholders. There was often, however, a difficulty in moving beyond tokenism, and understanding how to change the policy context and the culture in institutions and communities towards children and young people.

I undertook research in Nepal and the UK, to explore different aspects of context and to understand how power dynamics affected the way children and young people's evidence translated into positive outcomes for children or transformation of organisations and broader community dynamics. The research was carried out in varying social and political contexts in non-governmental and governmental settings: The Croydon Children's Fund, Save the Children's Saying Power Scheme and the programmes of a non-governmental organisation called the Himalayan Community Development Forum (HICODEF), partners of ActionAid Nepal. Each of these projects had involved past participatory evaluations, and my research revisited the children, young people, staff and policy decision-makers to examine what evidence they had valued and used.

In the high hills of Nepal, children typically had the responsibility to collect water. Water taps were built in the village but children were not consulted beforehand. When undertaking an impact evaluation, with children's participation, HICODEF found that the taps were too high for many children to reach. The simple solution of building steps to the taps has helped children in their household tasks.

*... before we were saying to the adults that we had to have help to get water from the taps and after this project they hear our voices - the children can get water from the taps*

**Gunja, former member of the child club**

Gunja acted as a champion for the other children and young people. He motivated them to continue lobbying adults for positive change in their village. A decade later children and young people are listened to as respected community members.

From the research, the 'Change-scape' model was developed. It considers how aspects of context make a difference and how different mechanisms of communication and collaboration can help encourage

more dialogue and spaces for participation. Examples from the research include:

- forming reference groups of decision-makers who could be involved in the process from the beginning
- holding showcases/ visits for service providers and children
- presentations using different media
- networking lunches to share on successful approaches
- residential for capacity building, planning and evaluating with young people
- feedback/ dialogue sessions
- supportive relationships such as mentors to help young people meet their own goals
- child clubs when run by children and supported by adults

ChildHope has since developed a training manual, building on the above.

*ChildHope works with 35 partners across 11 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Our partners work on: child abuse and exploitation; juvenile Justice and participation; and children affected by HIV/AIDS. The main themes for ChildHope are: child protection and participation; gender justice; and monitoring, evaluation and learning.*

[www.childhope.org.uk](http://www.childhope.org.uk)

## Learning from Scottish Experiences

The Think Tank heard from examples of children and young people's participation, on 'what works' from their perspectives.

### Quarriers – what works?

Children and young people from Quarriers, a non-governmental organisation providing services in Scotland, gave advice to the Think Tank based on their experiences:

- Value people's involvement
- Invest in people
- Have options for involvement/varied methods of input
- Inform people
- Make it age appropriate ... relevant ... accessible ... interesting
- Don't use jargon
- Don't already have made the decision
- Don't force involvement

*For more information on Quarriers, see <http://www.quarriers.org.uk/AboutQuarriers.aspx>*

## The Children's Parliament Climate Change project

Summary from Colin Morrison,  
Children's Parliament staff member

In spring 2008, 20 Members of the Children's Parliament (MCPs) in Scotland were invited to take part in the Children's Climate Change Project. This innovative project was brought together to engage children in the global debate on climate change and particularly the national debate on the Scottish Climate Change Bill which was being developed by Scottish Government.

Children participated in a series of workshops – using drama/role-play and visual arts they learned about climate change and its impact on Scotland. They considered the challenges facing our country to act responsibly both locally and in a global context. They learned about Parliamentary processes and what a Climate Change Bill might mean for Scotland.

Whilst MCPs considered real issues and challenges their influence is perhaps strongest in the sense of their 'moral voice' which implored adults to act. The strongest message was that of individual and shared responsibility – that now is the time to make a difference and help stop climate change – and that Scotland should lead with strong Climate Change legislation. Some other important messages from the children were:

- Children are worried about the future if we do nothing about climate change
- Children are concerned about how climate change affects people in Scotland, their health and wellbeing, as well as people in other countries
- Children are concerned how climate change affects other living creatures, particularly endangered species.

The children proposed individual and collective actions:

- Walk and cycle more, use public transport more and fly less
- Use our cars less or share your car
- Use less household energy
- Compost and recycle
- Buy locally produced food or grow your own and buy locally made products

The Climate Change project was brought together by WWF Scotland, the Children's Parliament and Children in Scotland and supported by Scottish Government and the Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People. In particular Scottish Government colleagues spent time with MCPs, discussing views and understanding children's perspectives. The dialogue that developed was serious and respectful.

The Children's Parliament works with children in the context of family, school and community. In our creative projects, consultations and community programme children learn about their human rights whilst acquiring knowledge, skills, behaviours and values for citizenship. Our work connects children with each other, with adults, with their communities, with policy and services.

*For more on the Climate Change project – to see our DVD and read the report - go here: <http://www.childreparliament.org.uk/projects/climate-change>*

## Youth Commission on Alcohol

Summary from Tobias Paul,  
Youth Commissioner

Scottish Government Ministers asked Young Scot (the national youth information and citizenship charity) to deliver a Youth Commission on Alcohol. The brief was to support young people to make suggestions for policy and action, to change Scotland's culture in relation to alcohol.

I was one of the sixteen Youth Commissioners who presented their recommendations to the Scottish Minister for Public Health and Sport in March 2010, following an intensive year-long investigation. Over the year the Youth Commissioners participated in conferences, seminars and meetings. The Commission took evidence from health services, children's service users, education specialists, academic researchers, medical consultants, police, alcohol industry, Facebook managers, MEPs and Members of Scottish Youth Parliament.

There are three aspects that I found most important during my time with the Alcohol Commission.

First, a key feature of the 'Youth Commission' concept was the very clear commitment from everyone involved: from the dedicated support from Young Scot; to the inputs from the Advisory Group; and, ultimately, the sheer amount of time and resource that was given over to us by the experts in our investigations. This face-to-face exposure helped us to not only gain an insight into the key issues, but also to interact throughout the process with greater confidence so that we could maximise the opportunities presented to us.

Second, a strong emphasis was placed upon making the end result practical. Too often, 'participation' projects seem to disappear without any tangible results. In order to make any process worthwhile, it is critical that it is seen to have real effects; this might be through actually generating a change in policy, but even something as simple as a response from policy-makers is sufficient to show that participation matters.

Third, for anyone considering involving children and young people in decision making I would advise you to

ensure there is a framework setting out how the process as a whole will run from the very beginning; whilst it must be flexible enough to take advantage of opportunities as they arise, such structure provides a useful series of signposts so that the project remains on track and allows participants to arrange their social lives!

#### *Report of Recommendations*

<http://www.youngscot.net/what-we-do/project-directory/youth-commission-on-alcohol.aspx>

*Building The Boat details the process used in the Youth Commission model and how this can be used as an effective example of involving young people in policy making and co-production.* <http://www.youngscot.net/what-we-do/project-directory/youth-commission-on-alcohol.aspx>

*Video about the Youth Commission on Alcohol by visiting:* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUldlx2eUjU&feature=email>

chair. Within the group we wanted to agree our priorities and we did this through democratic decision-making, where there was a consensus on the issues. To better prepare for meetings with Ministers and CoSLA, we also undertook fact-find projects; for example, to address the gaps in housing policy, we visited real refuges to evaluate their quality and ask what children and young people think. The facts we gathered about the reality of domestic abuse in Scotland allowed us to make concrete arguments for each gap. Our successful national survey - "Shaping the Future: One Voice at a Time" - has been especially useful in preparing arguments to present to Ministers. At the end of November 2011, we launched VAV's legacy film, which comes with a handy booklet summarising what we've learned and our advice to other children and young people who wish to participate.

*For more information about VAV and how we work, please visit us at <http://voiceagainstviolence.org.uk/>*

## **Voice Against Violence**

Summary by Declan and Raya

Voice Against Violence is a group of "young experts" who all have unique experiences of domestic abuse and different services. We have been in action for two years now and we have learned some truly amazing participation techniques that we believe could allow children and young people to have a real say in shaping policy decisions in Scotland. We want our actions to continue beyond VAV, so we always do our best to promote the universal benefits of participation from all children and young people.

VAV was originally launched to complement a National Domestic Abuse Delivery Plan priority focused on participation. We are lucky enough to be part of a structure which allowed us to have a consistent dialogue with Ministers and CoSLA (local government). Not only was it empowering to be able to talk directly to the top levels of Government, it was vital for making change happen. We are also respected with an equal say in meetings, which is important as one of our key roles is to be a "critical friend" to the Government and point out areas of domestic abuse policy which need attention, such as funding for Support Workers.

Until the conclusion of the Delivery Plan, VAV was supported by the Programme Board and Participation Steering Group, whose job was to help us identify gaps in services. However, the work of VAV did not end with that plan, as our ultimate goal of eradicating the "dark stain" of domestic abuse from Scotland - and improving the lives of children and young people experiencing it - is an ongoing one.

In order to play to our strengths, each member of VAV has a different role, such as writer, spokesperson and

## Ways Forward?

Think Tank participants discussed what changes could and should be made, to meet the current challenges for children and young people's participation.

### 1. Widespread cultural change in organisations, policy-making and adults more generally.

Without a respectful attitude to children and young people, participation activities can become tokenistic exercises. This should reflect the reality that children and young people have important and valuable substantive contributions to the policy-making process – i.e. it is not merely a matter of them having the right to be heard.

Some organisations have made participation part of how they work, while for others participation is a marginal activity. Participation does not always mean extra costs, but it does require cultural change. The question arises about how effectively children's rights is integrated into professionals' initial and continued training.

*“We need to stop preaching only to the converted.”*

*“Participation’ can be presented in ways that render it meaningless - this does not encourage further involvement.”*

### 2. Effective examples should be shared.

More networking of children and young people's participation groups could strengthen their collective influence. Good practice should be shared much more widely with the children's and youth sector – including both voluntary organisations and public agencies.

*“Don't reinvent the wheel.”*

*“Organising the grassroots.”*

### 3. Adapt the policy process.

Jargon should be avoided and simple language used. Incentives for organisations to involve children and young people, should be developed and promoted, alongside policy and legal requirements.

### 4. Address the whole policy process.

Children and young people need to be involved earlier, as new policy is being formed, as well as later, as policy is being finalised and then implemented. Children and young people's timeframes and availability need to be recognised in involving them.

*“Build participation into the whole process from the beginning. Don't just have a consultation exercise once the policy has been developed and a glossy consultation document produced.”Change takes a long time - too long for young people.”*

### 5. Capitalise on the possibilities.

For example: Scotland has a mechanism for public petitions, which are submitted to the Scottish Parliament. Relationships matter and Scotland is small enough that these can be effectively built.

The challenges for children and young people's participation are now widely recognised. Scotland has particular strengths, in Government commitment, enthusiasm and productive approaches. The Think Tank has identified ways forward that could address the challenges, utilise the strengths and seek to embed children and young people's participation in meaningful, effective and sustainable ways.



### **For further information**

For further information about the initiative, see the Scotland's Children's Sector Forum website [http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/poly\\_w\\_cpg.htm](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/poly_w_cpg.htm) or contact Sara Collier at Children in Scotland at [scollier@childreninscotland.org.uk](mailto:scollier@childreninscotland.org.uk) or on 0131 222 2412.

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