



Child Rights Governance

Children Speak Out

Summary of research with children
on their civil and political rights

Background

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which nearly every country in the world has ratified, gives children the right to participate in governance at different levels of society. This includes public decision-making processes at national and local level. The UNCRC provides children with civil rights and freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and access to information¹. And it says that governments should listen to children's opinions when making decisions about issues that concern them.

In early 2016, the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University and Save the Children carried out research with 1.606 children, aged 8-17, from 60 countries across the world². The aim of the research was to better understand, from children themselves, the extent to which they can make use of these rights, what obstacles they face, and what they think needs to be done by adults to improve children's access to these rights. The research was based on an online consultation tool and face to face group discussions with children.

While the input from more than 1.600 children offer rich insights, it is important to note that many of the children who participated in the research have experience in speaking out and being supported by non-governmental organizations. These children do therefore not represent all the children that have never used their civil rights and freedoms before, and the research findings should therefore be read with that in mind.

A summary of the main findings from the research is outlined below. The full research report and a child-friendly version of the same report can be found on Save the Children's Resource Centre³.

Children want to be involved

Children want to be involved in civic action and public processes. Over 80% of children responding to the online survey understand and are interested in the decisions made by governments and other people in positions of authority about issues happening in their community, country or the world. Regionally, some differences emerged with more children from Latin America and the Caribbean expressing an interest in these issues, followed by Eastern Europe, Western Europe and Other Groups, Africa and Asia-Pacific⁴.

Children often feel motivated to act when they know more about their rights. They also want to take action when they experience injustice, to support children who are worse off than themselves, and to act on problems they experience themselves.

“ ‘We were thinking about the children from communities that don't have a space where they can play and there wasn't anyone to speak for them.’
- Child, Latin America

Children are involved with and want to change many different issues: They take action against discriminatory practices, such as the exclusion of children from ethnic minority groups, children living with disabilities and discrimination against LGBTI⁵ people. They fight against different forms of violence and harmful practices, any denial of access to education and even infrastructure problems in their communities. Children also influence governments to put in place mechanisms and spaces where children can talk directly to decision-makers.

“ ‘We decided to take action on different topics such as obligatory classes/courses from different school teachers, the improvement of the quality of education and the charge on medical care for children.’
- Child, Eastern Europe

1. UNCRC, Articles 12, 13 and 15

2. Centre for Children's Rights, Queens University Belfast, and Save the Children (2016), Enabling the exercise of civil and political rights: the views of children

3. <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/library/enabling-exercise-civil-and-political-rights-views-children>

4. Regions have been defined using the five regions used by the United Nations

5. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersexual

- “ ‘Children without birth certificates are not able to write their ordinary level examination.’
- Child, Africa

The activities that the children are involved in often require a high level of advocacy skills and involve different strategies, such as meetings and written submissions, research, consultations and public events. Children across the study are hindered in taking action because they do not know how to get involved, they lack resources, they are afraid or told not to get involved, and feel like taking action would not result in change. Fewer children in Africa and Asia reported feeling safe, when using their civil and political rights than children in other regions.

Children’s right to access to information

A majority of children feel they can access information about issues affecting or interesting them – both online and offline. 66% of children responding to the online survey can access information online and 56% can access information offline. Many children from Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Europe and Others can access online information, but there are still challenges to accessing online information for children from Africa and Asia-Pacific.

- “ ‘We don’t know much about the internet, that’s why we can’t use it to its full potential. If we could get information about the birth and death rates of children from different backgrounds, numbers of street and working children, political demonstrations, we’d be able to plan our work better around that information.’
- Child, Asia-Pacific

Children did report safety concerns when accessing information, particularly offline. On average, 23% of the children responding to the online survey do not feel safe accessing information online and 25% feel unsafe accessing information offline. Levels were higher in Africa and Asia. Children in focus group discussions also indicated feeling unsafe when sourcing information related to ‘sensitive’ issues, such as domestic violence, local spending, or security issues.

Children’s recommendations on how their right to access information can be improved:

- Better access to child-friendly information
- Support from adults to access and understand issues
- Better access to online information

- “ ‘Some issues like child marriages are difficult to address, even community elders do not encourage us to discuss those.’
- Child, Asia-Pacific

Children access information from different sources. They are more likely to get information from family, friends, and adults in schools, and by watching the TV. Children were least likely to seek support from politicians for their action.

Children cite that NGOs help them to access and understand information, including by translating the information into child-friendly materials. Children also remind us that adults can also act as a barrier when they do not take children’s requests for information seriously or when they discourage children from seeking information that adults consider inappropriate for children to discuss. Children would also like improved access to more official government information.

“ ‘Some of the information needed further explanation because of graphs etc. so that it becomes child-friendly and understandable.’
- Child, Africa

“ ‘Having access to and getting to know what’s going on is a problem even for an elderly person, leave alone children.’
- Child, Africa

Children’s right to freedom of expression

Overall, children responding to the online survey feel that they can express their views freely and safely in private. However, the picture looks different when applied to the public sphere, whether online or offline. Only 34% of children felt safe expressing their views in public compared to 81% in private. A number of children engaged in civic action had also received threats from those who are the focus of their campaigns.

Children’s views on freedom of expression (responses to online survey)				
		% Yes	% No	% Don’t know
Can you express your views freely ...	in private?	77.4	14.3	8.3
	online without being anonymous?	43.1	34.8	22.1
	in public?	44.1	38.3	17.6
Would you feel comfortable expressing your views freely...	in private?	79.5	11.5	9.0
	online without being anonymous?	41.2	37.7	21.1
	in public?	39.2	42.9	17.9
Would you feel safe expressing your views freely...	in private?	80.7	12.2	7.2
	online without being anonymous?	35.8	41.4	22.8
	in public?	34.2	46.0	19.9

The most common challenge children face to expressing themselves freely relates to adults and their objections to children speaking out. Children’s lack of confidence is another barrier to them expressing their views. This barrier is often overcome with experience and support from adult facilitators and other children.

“ ‘We are children and if a child gets to the point where it’s not expected of them by the authorities and even the community, people can consider you a misbehaving child.’
- Child, Africa

- “ ‘When doing the interviews, it was difficult at first because I didn’t know how to ask people, but when the kids taught me I felt more confident.’
- Child, Latin America and Caribbean

Children’s indicators of when adults listen

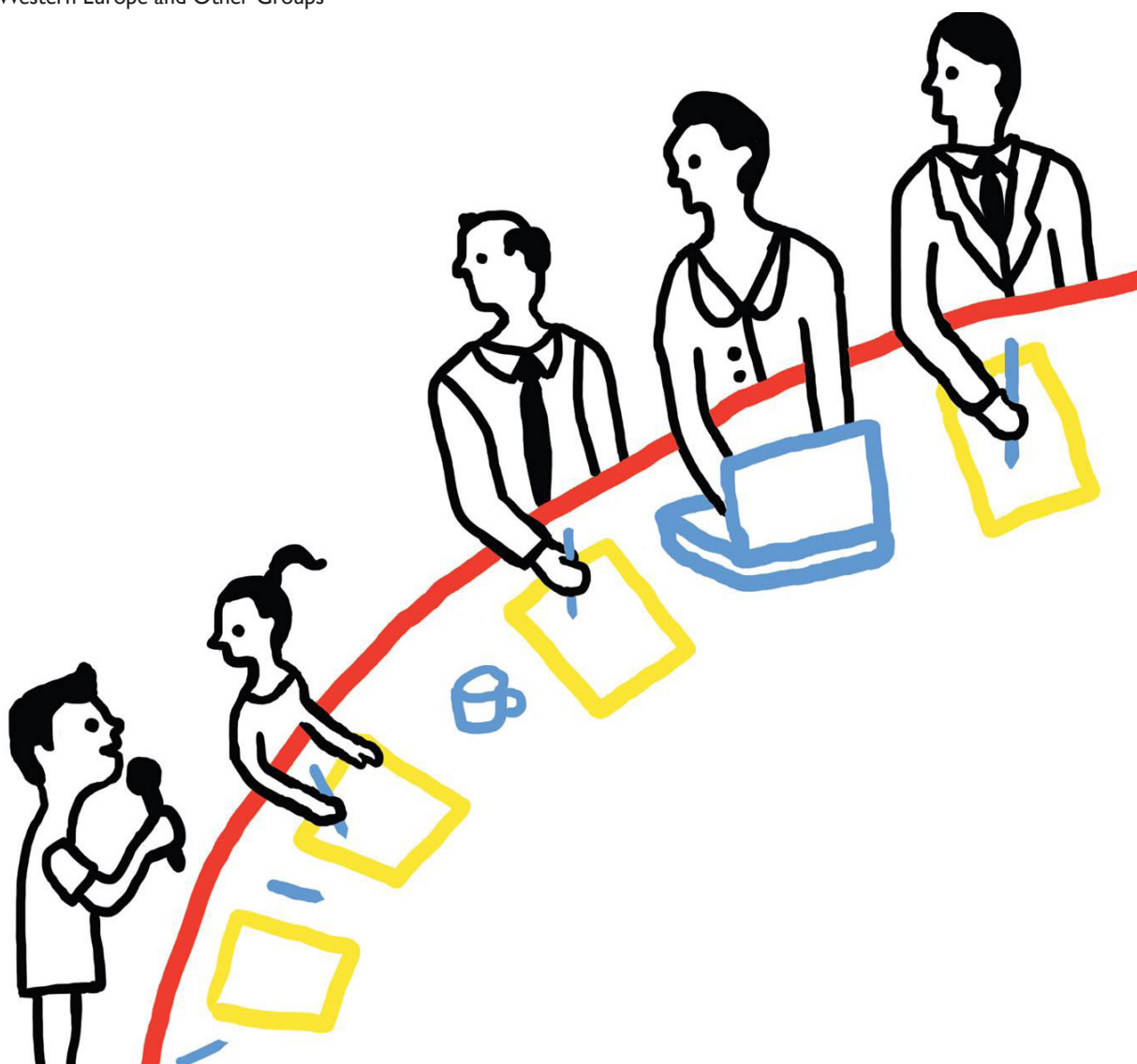
- Adults listening with attention
- Adults responding and ask questions back
- Adults looking at children’s face during discussion
- Adults not coercing them to take particular positions
- Adults supporting and joining them in their actions
- Adults playing their parts in educating other adults

79% of children responding to the online survey feel that adults are listening to them. However, only 63% of children have confidence in adults taking their views seriously, and only 62% feel confident they will act on their recommendations. Children from Latin America and the Caribbean are the most positive about their views being given due weight with children from Eastern Europe being the least positive.

Children in focus group discussions also felt that parents and adults in their community are more likely to listen to them than government officials. They also feel that it is more difficult to engage with national institutions.

Children engaged in civic action often credited adult decision-makers listening to them to the fact that they work as a group of children.

- “ ‘There needs to be some way that young people can get involved with government and talk to our leaders about the issues that are important for us.’
- Child, Western Europe and Other Groups



“ ‘Because it was the collaboration force and spirit among children which enabled them to put senior governmental officials “with their back against the wall” in order to take responsibility for the survival of children.’

- Children, Eastern Europe

Children’s right to freedom of association

A majority of children responding to the online survey feel they can join a group (64%) and feel comfortable (62%) and safe (63%) doing so. A different picture appeared in respect of children setting up their own groups. Only around 50% of children feel comfortable and safe setting up their own group. Interestingly, the children from Latin America and the Caribbean (only 13% of the children who responded to this survey) were more positive about setting up their own groups and joining groups than other regions.

Children’s recommendations on how their right to association can be improved

- Children’s groups and organizations should have greater visibility
- Closer connection should be established between children’s groups and existing governance structures, particularly at a local level
- Proactive engagement with parents should be established
- Extended and ongoing NGO engagement with children once projects had come to an end
- Extending the range of association opportunities to include sport and cultural activities

Many of the children providing input to the research through focus group discussions belong to a children’s group and are generally very positive about their experience.

These children feel safe exercising their right to freedom of association, largely due to their trust of the adult facilitators from the NGO supporting them.

Children’s reluctance to join or form groups centers around a lack of awareness of organizations or groups they could join, difficulty in accessing groups or organizations and a lack of resources to support their own activities. Some children lack confidence to join groups and some children are just not interested.

Certain groups of children have less opportunity to join groups, for example children in rural areas and working children. Some children have tried to overcome this latter barrier through outreach workshops, campaigns and the use of the radio to encourage greater participation.

“ ‘Setting up my own group will need resources.’

- Child, 13, Africa

“ ‘Because we have no activities like this in our town.’

- Child, 14, Asia-Pacific

For many children, concerns of parents were potential barriers to their freedom of association. For example, in some contexts parents were supportive of their children associating with peers for educational reasons or for study, but were concerned that more general association could expose children to ‘bad influences’ or distract them.

Children's right to peaceful assembly

60% of children responding to the online survey can meet freely with other children to discuss an issue or take action and 57% feel safe doing so. Fewer children felt they could join a public protest or demonstration (45%) and only 38% felt safe attending such events. Children from Africa and Eastern Europe feel least safe taking part in public protest.

A number of barriers hindered children from exercising their right to peaceful assembly ranging from safety, fear of repercussion, and that parents do not want them to engage in these kind of activities. Some children also indicated that they lack experience in attending demonstrations and would need adult support in exercising this right.

“ ‘I think I am not so experienced to take part in a public protest, we need an adult who teach us and help us because we are just children and our opinions can be influenced.’

- Child, Eastern Europe

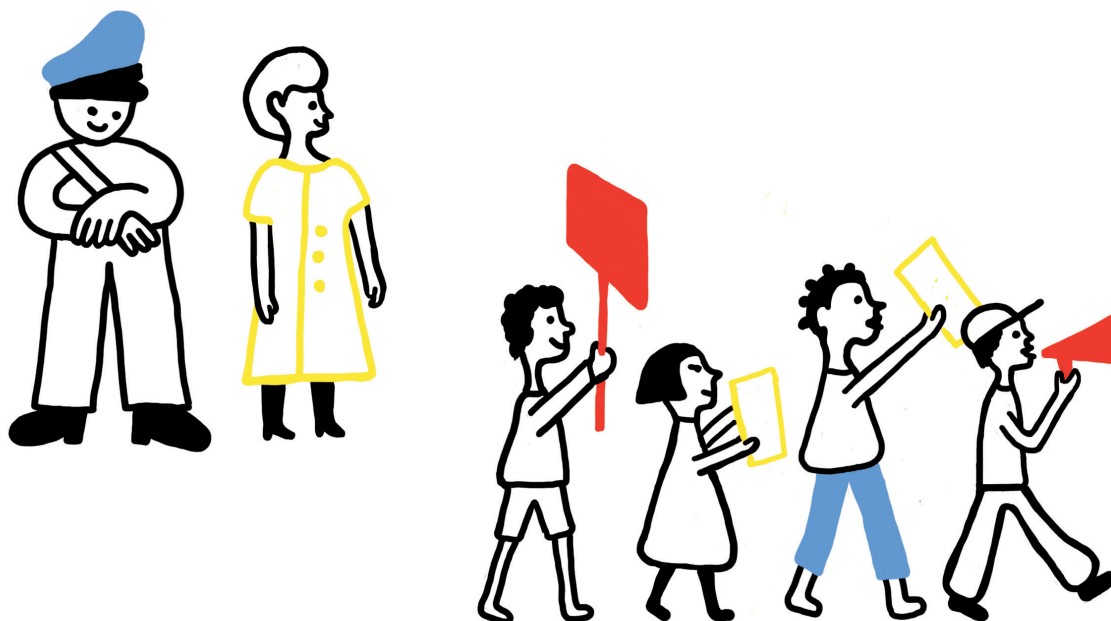
Children's recommendations on how their right to peaceful assembly could be improved

- Supportive adults
- Keeping parents informed and involved
- Cooperation and communication with authorities
- Secure and safe spaces
- Flexibility in relation to meeting spaces
- Financial support

As mentioned above, many of the children providing input to the research through focus group discussions belong to a children's group and are engaged in civic action. These children are positive about their opportunities to meet freely, work with other children and engage in public activities such as meetings with politicians and community leaders through public town hall or national assembly meetings, awareness raising campaigns and attending conferences, public rallies and demonstrations. At the same time, they also raised safety as a concern when engaging in public activities. Safety concerns related to participation in public demonstrations could to a certain extent be reduced through the presence of supportive adults from NGOs and/or their parents.

“ ‘I feel safe when I join these events because we normally cooperate with police and local authority before doing those activities.’

- Child, Asia-Pacific



Realizing children's civil and political rights – the way forward

The majority of the 1.600 children taking part in this research were interested in civic action and influencing government decisions at different levels. They are motivated by both their own situation and the situation of other children in their communities.

Children's safe, inclusive and meaningful engagement in civic action and governance processes depends on them being able to exercise their rights as set out in the UNCRC: to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and timely access to information – online and offline. However, children face a number of difficulties in exercising their civil and political rights. Some are challenges also faced by adults and some are challenges they have to face because they are children. Specific measures should be put in place to realize these rights for the most excluded groups of children.

The children that participated in the research identified a number of actions that could help them overcome these challenges, including the following:

Adults must respect children and their rights

A repeated theme throughout the consultations with children is adults as a key barrier to the realization of children's civil and political rights. Adults do not take children seriously, when they engage in civic action to achieve change. However, when children have the support of adults, for example through adult-led child rights organizations, they are better able to act and be heard. Adult organizations supporting children's civic action also need to provide longer-term and follow-up activities for these children and take the different schedules of children into account when planning activities. Children also want proactive support from other adults to engage with their parents and explain to them the benefits of children's engagement in civic action.

Flexible spaces for children to meet, learn about their rights and take joint action

Children need a wide range of opportunities to come together, where they can safely meet, learn about their rights and about public decision-making, take joint action and get involved in politics. Capacity strengthening opportunities should be available for all children, including the most excluded groups. Children would also like to see increased support to, and greater visibility of, child groups and organizations.

Formal mechanisms to enable communication with governments

Children want closer connections between children's groups and existing governance structures, particularly at local level, where they can engage in governance processes and provide their views and recommendations. They want more to be done to teach local stakeholders to consider children's groups as institutional partners and how to involve children in decision making processes. They also want more opportunities to engage with public institutions and government at national level.

Access to child-friendly information

For many children, access to information is restricted. Some children need support from adults to understand information. Some children do not feel safe when accessing information. To overcome these challenges, children want better access to internet, more information available in child-friendly versions and for adults, and governments in particular, to help them get relevant information.

Education as an enabler of children's civil and political rights

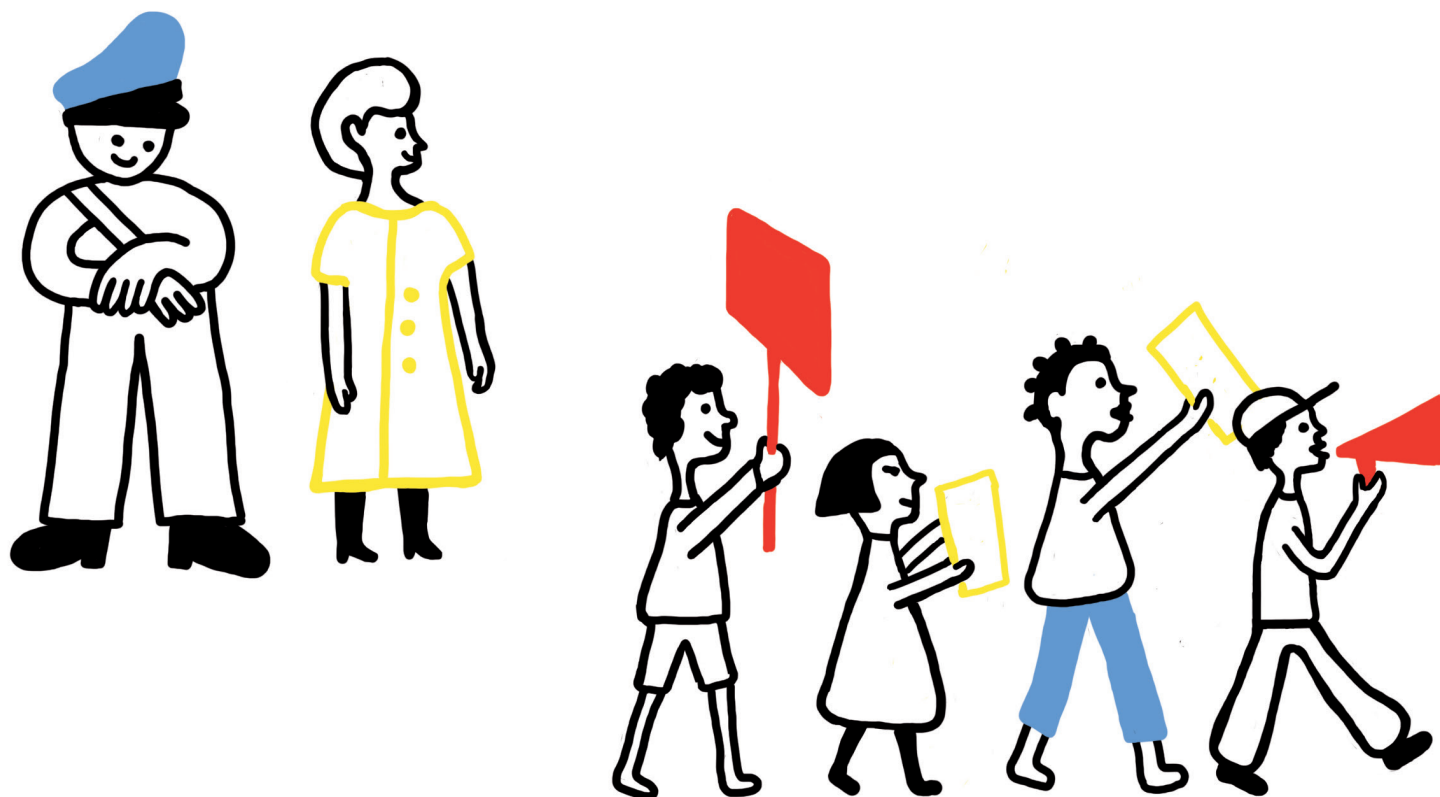
Children consider the education system as important in helping them to use their civil and political rights. They want to learn about their rights and how to access information in school. The education system should also help strengthen their communication skills and confidence to speak out.

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