

Concept Note on Participation

Participation is a human rights principle, and as such, it is not a gift or privilege bestowed by adults on children, but the right of every child capable of expressing a view. In other words, it is a right for all children – especially the most marginalized and vulnerable in society.

1. Background and Context

This concept note is based on Section 13 of the PPP Manual of 2003 “Guidance Note on Promoting Participation of Children and Young People” as applied to the drafting of the new MTSP for the period 2006-2009.

The purpose of this note is to outline the operational framework and key principles that underpin the policy and programmatic implications of seeking to increase the participation of children and young people in national development and UNICEF-assisted programmes. It seeks to shift participation from event-based approaches to the institutionalizing of participation opportunities in home, school and communities. It is based on the understanding that participation is a human right for all children and young people. Finally, it seeks to contribute towards promoting meaningful and authentic participation of children and young people – with special focus on the marginalized and vulnerable groups. The expected end result is a more open social, political and cultural environment in which children and young people become responsible citizens, exercising their rights and responsibilities as active citizens in society.

2. The Global Commitment to promoting meaningful participation of children and young people (Please also refer to the Checklist on Article 12 in the Implementation Handbook for the CRC)

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child lays down the principle and purpose of meaningful participation of children and young people, and Article 7 of CEDAW on women’s rights.

The Millennium Declaration in Article 25 reaffirms the commitment to work collectively for more inclusive political processes, allowing genuine participation by all citizens (and in this case, children and young people included) in all countries.

The World Fit for Children in para 32 (i) adopted at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children made a strong commitment towards increasing participation of children.

3. Ethical Principles of meaningful participation of children and young people

- Key guiding principles of Human rights include Participation and CRC principles (especially related to the “best interests of the child”) guide the purpose and approaches to participation of children and young people in policy and programming
- The participation and the right to freedom of expression should be viewed and supported in the context of the “evolving capacities of the child”
- Participation should not be tokenistic or manipulative
- Participation should acknowledge the balance between “rights” and “responsibilities” – both in relation to children/young people and adults
- Meaningful participation can be realized by establishing equal partnerships with children and young people – wherein there is respect for children and their agency
- Participation needs to ensure that the rights and roles of children of marginalized and vulnerable groups (based on age, gender, ethnicity, economic or social status, etc.) and poor families or children in difficult and emergency situations, are respected and represented
- “Informed consent” of children and young people on the action and their respective roles and responsibilities
- Ensuring safety and protection for children in all circumstances – especially in the process of their participation
- Confidentiality of information, research and its use

4. A Human Rights Approach to Participation

As noted above, participation is a non-negotiable right of all children and young people as guaranteed under the CRC. Children whose rights are not realized have claims (as “claim-holders”) against those whose responsibility it is to act on it (as “duty-bearers”) – viz, parents, care-givers, communities, civil society organizations, governments, etc.

A human rights approach to participation implies five key roles for children and young people:

- (a) identifying unfulfilled rights and acting on them
- (b) claiming of rights
- (c) identifying capacity gaps in rights not realized and duties not performed
- (d) participating in the implementation of solutions

(e) involving in monitoring, evaluating and reporting

The programmatic implications of this approach imply the following:

- creation of specific **opportunities** for participation
- strengthening of **capacities** of children and adults – including organizational capacities
- creation of a wider **enabling environment** for meaningful participation

5. A Framework/Approach to Participation (Target 4) in Focus Area 1 of the MTSP

Target 4 is focused on enabling and empowering children and young people to participate in family, school and community life and in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and interventions affecting their lives. In this way UNICEF will help prepare a new generation of girls and boys that recognize and claim their own human rights – which at the same time, respects and contributes towards the fulfillment of the rights of others - and act as change agents in building a society based on human rights principles. Participation has a strong foundation in Focus Area 1 and along with evidence, analysis and advocacy it is stated as one of the key factors for progress both in this Focus Area as well as in other Focus Areas. Although participation has been presented as a “standalone” target in Focus Area 1, it is expected that it will be integrated in all focus areas – given the fact that it is an organizational target for UNICEF, along with HRBAP, gender mainstreaming, results-focus, holistic focus on the child, leveraging of resources, UN reforms, knowledge generation and excellence in management and operations.

5.1. Participation in the context of the UN country programming process

Participation is also important for guaranteeing developmental programmes – a principle that has been adopted as a “common understanding” within the UN system. Participation is fundamental to human-rights based approach to programming and it is laid down as one of the five basic elements of the HRBA (others include: express linkage to rights, accountability, equality and non-discrimination, and empowerment). In the Common Understanding Document it is stated that *“development cooperation contributes to the development of the capacities of ‘duty bearers’ to meet their obligations and/or of ‘right holders’ to claim their rights”*. Capacities for human rights promotion and protection can be only acquired by rights-holders through the process of their active participation in all parts of development programming. Participation is central to the developmental approach as the development is “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy”. The goal of development is to be free and be able to choose and live the sort of life one wants to live. A community can be considered developed to the extent that it ensures that its entire people, including children, are in a position to participate and shape a life of dignity.

Participation is also important for personal development. Children and young people do not develop by being passive. It is only through participation that they develop self-confidence and skills, build competencies, form aspirations, gain confidence and attain valuable resources. Young people are learning - through experience - to make informed decisions, to develop stable relationships and to take on the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

Participation is especially relevant in the situations of conflict and post conflict when children and young people face multiple risks and may be targeted for violence, abuse and exploitation. Involvement of young people in community life provides alternatives to exploitation and violence and thus increases their own protection. This proves that participation is also a strong protective factor in situations of crisis and conflict.

There is also need for careful consideration of the political dimension of the participation of children and young people, specially in humanitarian situations to achieve a balance between their right to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives and their right to be protected through the promotion of appropriate, safe and constructive opportunities for involvement in community development and peace-building.

Participation also contributes to the quality and sustainability of programmes, as both sustainability and improved programme design are best achieved by participatory methodologies. Sustainable participation requires investment not only in young girls and boys but also in their parents, care-givers and local communities. Failure to make this investment can create barriers between children and adults, and disempowers children from the needed guidance and support that should be provided by their parents, teachers, care-givers, local authorities and local communities.

The Focus Area 1 concept paper also refers to UNICEF’s obligation to promote participation of children, adolescents and young people and women as an agency that champions child rights to survival, development, protection and participation. Compared to other UN agencies, that have involved young people mostly in advocacy work, UNICEF has a comparative advantage in this area. In UNICEF supported programmes participation of children and young people have ranged from youth opinion surveys, student parliaments, involving children in research,

programming and policy dialogue. UNICEF therefore can make a valuable contribution to the UN system in promoting and institutionalizing meaningful children and young people's participation.

5.2. Participation in the context of building Strategic Partnerships

This puts UNICEF in good position to play an important role in development of an operational framework for participation of children in order to support governments, civil society and all other partners to ensure that children and young people are enabled and empowered to effectively demand fulfillment of their rights within their families, communities and nations and to participate in the design, management and monitoring of policies relevant to their lives. The operational framework – the expected outcome of Target 4 - will aim to ensure that the participation of children is authentic, meaningful, culturally-sensitive and beneficial both for their personal development and for the development of their communities. It will encourage participation of children and young people through the development of “participation spaces” for children in their daily lives, within their families, schools, and communities, as well as through opening up of opportunities for their influence on national policies and planning – especially those that directly relate to children and young people. Children should first and foremost be invited to participate on issues relevant to their own environment – home, school, community, family and their participation should progressively be institutionalized. As such, an ad hoc approach to involving children and promoting participation is meaningless and does not contribute towards sustaining participation as an ongoing process. Participation in local institutions and structures related to basic services is likely to increase the user-friendliness and effectiveness of the service. At the same time, the participation and contribution of children and young people in the reporting process on the CRC, NPA implementation and monitoring, PRSPs, etc. are key opportunities that enable them to experience and develop their capacities to engage in high-level policy and programmes. The importance of young people's involvement at the national level becomes even more relevant in situations of conflict or post-conflict when young people can actively contribute to building of a peaceful and democratic society.

Special efforts need to be made to ensure authentic participation of children and young people from deprived and marginalized population groups, as well as girls and young women. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable in many societies as they experience limited mobility especially in rural areas. In many societies girls face extreme forms of discrimination and their subordinate place in society denies them control over most aspects of their lives. The persistently high rate of child marriage in some societies is an example of how adolescent girls are particularly discriminated and marginalized.

Very limited progress has also been made with disabled children, who are almost universally excluded from the participatory initiatives that presently exist. Participatory initiatives provide an opportunity to challenge and question the discrimination perpetrated against many groups of children. It is important that initiatives adopt clear policies on equity and inclusion and take active steps to ensure that no groups are excluded. Often there will be need to develop special and targeted initiatives to create opportunities for those for whom otherwise those projects will remain inaccessible. Tackling participation among excluded children is integral to tackling exclusion itself.

Strategic partnerships are important for the promotion of meaningful participation of children and young people, starting with the building of partnership with children and young people themselves – their organizations and networks. Relationship with children should be based on mutual respect and power sharing and on accepting them as equal partners, not as “beneficiaries” or a “target group”. Participation should also be seen in the context of the child's immediate environment (family, school, community).

Many adults working with children and young people (teachers, health providers, staff of youth centers, media practitioners, etc.) have limited capacity to deal with their needs and support meaningful participation. Traditional and non-creative approaches are usually adopted that do not enhance the knowledge and skills of children and adolescents to their maximum potentials. Though schools are presented as the most important institution in the life of children, school staff is not always fully trained in how to help students grow into responsible adults. In the school-setting, the attitude of teachers is one of the key factors that can either promote young people's participation or create an adolescent-friendly environment. Building the capacity and developing strategic partnerships with parents, care-givers, teachers, local administrators and officials, etc. are important to sustain meaningful participation – especially at the local levels. Institutionalizing these processes in local administrative and social structures – including school management, village councils, local governance committees, etc. – are equally important. Partnerships with families and local communities will facilitate addressing traditional and cultural constraints to children's participation, while partnerships with civil society organizations are key to reach the unreached children and young people.