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BASIS FOR A DEBATE ON CHILD PARTICIPATION IN A LOCAL CONTEXT



Child-friendly Cities



Introduction

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, based on acknowledging that all children throughout the world are entitled to full legal rights, urges the signatory States 1) to guarantee to a child with sufficient capacity to form his/her own judgement the right to freely express his/her opinions on matters that affect him/her and 2) that his/her opinions will be duly taken into account in accordance with the age and maturity of the child expressing them. With this aim in mind, Article 12 calls for the need to give the child the opportunity of being heard, either directly or through an appropriate intermediary, in the course of any procedures affecting him/her. This Article is linked to Article 13 of the Convention, which alludes to the right to freedom of expression, or to be more precise, that children may search for, disseminate and be informed about ideas of any kind.

The programme of the UNICEF-Committee Spain entitled “Child-friendly Cities” (www.ciudadesamigasdelainfancia.org) promotes the idea that all children should have a public voice in the 8,164 municipalities in Spain so that in this way they contribute to making their town or city a better, more habitable place. There are many benefits to child participation:

- It contributes to the appropriate personal development of the children since it demonstrates their abilities and engenders self-confidence;
- It improves the decision-making process because it involves a wider social collective and a sector often overlooked during such processes – i.e. Children – whose contributions may enhance the final outcome;
- It helps to protect children against abuse and more generally, against any action that violates their rights, because it offers them the opportunity to denounce the perpetrator;
- It facilitates the acquisition of democratic values and allows these values to be put into practice thereby forming better citizens.

The programme “Child-friendly Cities” has been constituted as an initiative directed at supporting and rewarding all those local organizations that work to accomplish the principles contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and, more especially, those relating to real and effective child participation.

The present guide aspires to provide orientation to local administrative bodies since these are the first points of reference for the general child population and everyone involved in working for the benefit of children using basic instruments to initiate, foster and mobilize their actions with a view to promoting the participation of their youngest members of society.

1. What do we understand by ‘child participation’?

A process by which, children and young people, together with other people within their social environment, tackle issues that affect the way they live, both individually and collectively. The participants interact, respecting the dignity of others, with the intention of achieving shared objectives. Throughout the process, the children feel that they are developing a useful role at the heart of the community.

In this document we collate a few issues concerning child participation so that these may provide guidance to those who are interested in implementing this sort of initiative. Firstly, we look at ways of promoting child participation, followed by considering the levels and the degree of participation describing each in turn. The third section considers how a potential administrative body responsible for child participation would operate within a municipal context, and finally, we examine organizational criteria and the functioning of these Councils, Forums, Committees or similar bodies.

In elaborating this document, we have drawn on a series of studies carried out by the Participation Commission of the Institute for Children and the Family for the Community of Madrid together with the book entitled ‘The Social Participation of Children’. Just as importantly, this work collates a series of ideas expressed by authors like Francesco Tonucci, Ferrán Casas or Jaume Trilla amongst others, in the course of their presentations during Conferences of “The City for Children” held in Madrid and organized by Acción Educativa.

Since the endorsement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, initiatives involving child participation have been promoted in different geographical locations and in a range of social and political contexts. It has been principally the local organizations that have made the greatest effort to implement and disseminate the experiences of social participation involving the youngest children. Not everything promulgated as child participation can be considered appropriate practice. This, amongst other reasons, has inspired the elaboration of the present document. One of the initiatives of social participation in respect of children is that promoted by UNICEF together with its partners, the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs, the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces and the Local Network for the Rights of Children and Young People through the programme entitled ‘Child-friendly Cities’. This initiative was formalised in the invitations to the Competitions on Children’s Rights and Municipal Policies and in the protocols acknowledging Child-friendly Cities, initiatives that have generated both materials and practice that have facilitated and fostered the dissemination of child participation experiences.



2. How to promote child participation

The first step would have to be to engage and sensitize both adults and children and to make them aware that participation should take place naturally and at frequent intervals in all areas of activity. When necessary explicit guidelines should be provided, or when shared responsibilities are implied.

The best way to approach children is through direct contact in the context of every day matters that affect them. The suburbs, the municipality, the classroom, family decisions or the street are the natural spaces where participation may be fostered. Generally speaking, the immediate environment is where children may be involved more easily and where the results of this involvement may be appraised most effectively. With this goal in mind, children must be consulted about real issues, especially, although not exclusively, regarding questions affecting them directly. Issues to bear in mind:

1. SPEAKING/LISTENING

The initial and most important step is that of assigning to the children the leading role, letting them speak, allowing them to express opinions whilst adults listen and try to understand them and with a firm desire to take their views into account. If we acquire the habit of always asking ourselves, "what about the children?" we will guarantee that we don't forget anyone. We have to develop a culture of children, that is to say, the culture of listening, of observation, of respect for the child.

2. INSTIGATING DIALOGUE when actually elaborating projects and encouraging commitment and consensus in all questions that affect them and that impact on the rest of society.

3. GUARANTEEING CONTINUITY AND APPOINTMENT OF NEW REPRESENTATIVES.

The initiatives implemented must not be isolated occurrences, but rather, must be integrated and coordinated in order to achieve a global educational project. Just as importantly, it is necessary to ensure that representatives do not continue in their roles once they have surpassed the stipulated age limit. On many occasions, not only personal support, but also technical and economic resources will be required, these normally being contributed by the adult world.

4. FORMULATING SPECIFIC PROPOSALS FOR PROJECTS AND THE SCOPE OF INITIATIVES TAILORED TO CHILDREN'S TRANSITORY PERCEPTION.

It is not appropriate to begin a project with a group of children by posing questions as general and generic as

"How would you like your city to be?" or other similar questions. According to the experts, this is a poor way to begin, since this question would overwhelm the capacity for elaboration of a group of children.

5. UNDERSTANDING participation in the context of interpersonal and intergroup communication. Perceived, therefore, as a process within the general framework of interpersonal and intergroup communication between adults and children, in which different spaces, perspectives and levels of participation will have to be taken into account.

6. OPENING CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION and dissemination of these kinds of processes so that, as well as making them known, they may provide models for future initiatives.

3. Levels and degrees of socio-political participation

It has been said many times before that not everything that we call participation, really is. For years we have resorted to the Hart scale (2001) in order to distinguish the potential stages in this process. These levels of participation have also been recorded in a number of documents of the Council of Europe, specifically at the European Conference on the evolution of the role of children in family life: participation and negotiation (Council of Europe, 1994). There it was noted that in relationships between parents and children, various situations are observed that give rise to levels of participation by children, which we, as adults, could also bear in mind in our social life. These are the seven levels of participation indicated by Hart:

TO BE INFORMED

We all need information in order to be able to really participate in something. Children need information in a language that they are capable of understanding, consistent with every process involving him/her and tailored to his/her level of development.

TO BE LISTENED TO

If the participation is to have any positive value, the child has to feel that it is worth the effort to express his opinions and wishes. Capabilities for dialogue and negotiation are also required. A listening approach on the part of the adult is fundamental to encourage active participation.

TO BE CONSULTED

Participation is not exercised exclusively at the express request of the child. His/her opinion should be sought in



an active, regular and open manner, creating the time necessary and the appropriate systems in light of the objectives being pursued.

TO DISCUSS DECISIONS

A progressive step towards responsible participation consists in analysing and discussing different options and the reasons behind decisions, explaining why some positions cannot be accepted, which does not mean that they will not be taken into account.

NEGOTIATING AND REACHING CONSENSUS IN DECISIONS

It may be shown that decision-making is not solely dependent on adults. We frequently find ourselves faced with situations of conflicting interests or preferences, and nobody can reach an optimum decision to satisfy everyone. In this case, we must all adjust our aspirations to find an equitable consensus.

A considerable number of decisions may be taken by children without necessarily entailing the allocation of a specific budget or any other kind of resource. We must encourage children to take these decisions using the widest possible discretion, serving as an exercise for participation in other future decisions of greater magnitude. The distribution of prizes, competitions, arranging sporting events, organization of leisure activities, publications for children or celebrating Children's Day, according to circumstances, may provide some examples. It is important to promote creativity in children in all activities, because this reinforces leadership qualities and consolidates their perception and sense of autonomy.

TO SHARE DECISIONS

In the course of social life, responsibilities are allocated collectively and it would not be considered appropriate for only one person to assume all responsibilities on behalf of everyone. Each person should be aware of his share of responsibility and should be prepared to participate in the corresponding decision. Determine how all points of view can be taken into account and how to negotiate and agree what is best for everyone will be a matter of trial and error.

Sharing decisions also involves commitment and personal growth. Just as importantly, it is appropriate to develop evaluative appraisal and usefully, skills that are not innate and must be learnt gradually.

TO ACCEPT AND RESPECT THE DECISIONS MADE BY CHILDREN

This means accepting that children can assume defined responsibilities and that these are not necessarily devoid of risks. One has to respect and help to assimilate the mistakes of others; setting aside mistakes is not always the best way to learn from the experience. The progressive autonomy of each individual in different aspects of his life has to be accepted.

4. Functioning of the Participation Committee, Children's Council or similar body

We set out below a proposal that should be adapted according to the initiative and the actual circumstances in each municipality. The following issues may be borne in mind:

- The Committee will meet in full session once a month and each subcommittee should also meet at least monthly.
- Any convocation of meetings will be made personally and in writing by arrangement the previous day.
- Each member of the Committee will receive a file or a notebook for his work.
- The meetings will be held in appropriate municipal premises suitable for the purpose.
- Minutes will be taken at each plenary meeting and these will be dealt with in the same way as minutes from other Council meetings.
- Efforts will be made to ensure that decisions and resolutions are consensual. If there is no consensus, the level of support for each of the alternative proposals should be recorded.
- Self-evaluation will be undertaken periodically in respect of accomplishing the objectives and the proper functioning of the Committee or Children's Council.
- The suggestions and proposals of the subcommittees should be raised in writing with the Local Council or the equivalent body.
- The Committee will be able to study proposals entrusted to it by the Council, the Senior Executive Officer, or a Municipal Committee and will also be able to promote their own initiatives.
- The place to start is to establish some minimum objectives and some very specific tasks. For example, to give a view on an urban modification, some new local services, some municipal project that affects them directly, etc. This entails some basic requirements:



- To facilitate all the appropriate information necessary, adapted to the specific age groups.
- There must be a real possibility of taking their opinion into account; In other words, don't ask for an opinion on a project already concluded and closed.
- To guarantee enough time to allow the Committee or subcommittees to study the information and to hold meetings required before elaborating their proposals.

■ To establish clearly the relationship between the Committee or the Children's Council, if it exists, and the Local Council, recording the connection between both and the mutual commitments in the Terms of Reference.

■ An explicit commitment from the Town Hall/City Council to discuss and respond to the proposals that arise from child participation.

■ When the municipal Council undertakes any formal activity, it would be appropriate for a representative from among the children and young people to participate and this could be done through the Committee.

■ Irrespective of the municipal area that assumes this responsibility, it should have a bearing on the coordination of the different Councils involved in the attention of well-being of children. A project that has a bearing on their social participation must incorporate all their needs, interests and expectations in all areas (education, health, housing, city planning, culture, leisure, etc.)

■ The adult who facilitates the participation meetings should at the least have training in the necessary skills and strategies to lead and coordinate discussion groups of this kind without imposing his own criteria. If this person does not have specific training, efforts will be made to provide the means to acquire it.

5. Organizational criteria

■ **To guarantee explicit recognition of the project** by the Senior Executive Officer as the principal municipal authority and, of course, by Council government officials. We appreciate that the "involvement" of government officials increases the likelihood of sustaining the project. In this sense, if committed to creating participatory structures, they must be given as much formal support as possible.

■ **To endow the projects with the infrastructure and materials necessary** to achieve their objectives.

■ **To allocate the necessary budget** for adequate development of the project depending on the intended objectives. Political priorities are determined in the budgets. Loud declarations extolling the importance of children and their participation are without substance if they are not then matched with the necessary resources to put them into practice.

■ To set up a **work team** to develop the projects using a democratic organizational model, but which also envisages that one of the members of the team will be a point of reference with a particular interest in some aspect of the project.

■ To guarantee to the team the **working conditions necessary** to allow them to establish the project.

■ **To incorporate planning and evaluation of the projects** being promoted among the tasks allocated to the work team. In this matter it is not sufficient just to "do" the task, it is also essential to "evaluate" the proposed objectives and not just at the end of the project, but during its development.

■ **To guarantee information and continuing appropriate training** for those in charge of projects involving social participation of children.

■ **To guarantee technical coordination** of the various municipal areas that may have a bearing on the success of the project. In order to achieve this coordination, it is essential to provide the necessary information to ensure the cost-efficiency of resources. It would also be an advantage if the government official were to be involved in this task, subject to the agreement of the other areas connected to the project.

■ **To decentralize the project** so that it acquires a dimension relevant to the situation of children, to intervene in accessible territories (for example, in every suburb) encouraging meetings between different groups of children.

- If there is a Plan for Children, it should clearly establish participation by the subjects of the Plan. Participation is probably included in many of the proposals in the Plan and valued as a worth-while element.

- To guarantee the linking and relationship of the projects in which participation is a basic element. For example, "Local or School Agenda 21", initiatives orientated towards the introduction of changes in environmental, social and economic conditions using a series of indicators in which the general public must participate, both in their elaboration and in the supervision of their accomplishment. It would be



appropriate that those participating in “School Agenda 21” communicate with those in the Council or on the Participation Committee and it would be desirable that the Committee for Local Agenda 21 gives consideration to some form of participation by children with respect to the issues that affect them. -The administrative bodies for child participation in the municipalities should be made visible through the local media, if they are available, and by assisting the local media to broadcast their proposals and projects.

6. Operating Criteria

- **To plan and evaluate the proposals rigorously,** incorporating previous analyses, outcomes that are awaited, indicators to evaluate total or partial completion, etc.
- To plan any work proposal applying informed logic.
- To moderate aspirations: to build child participation consolidating every step. To take into account that small accomplishments motivate children to achieve new objectives whilst unattainable goals create disillusionment.
- To benefit from and consider the experiences of previous initiatives and projects already underway with objectives related to the same territory, in other words, to learn from one’s own past experiences and those of others.
- To involve families (where possible, in their own home environment) together with the rest of the community.
- To use **comprehensible methods accessible to children and appropriate techniques.** To make use of the potential offered by games, their games. To draw on the knowledge and experience of those working with children in both formal and informal education (leisure time, extracurricular activities, etc.)
- **To guarantee that the information for children is clear and accurate.** This premise should always be borne in mind, not only when the information is intended for small children. Any general information aimed at the whole community, should be drafted so that it can be understood by children. The youngest children can also assist with this task.

- **To disseminate the project to society as a whole** (objectives, contents, methodology, achievements...) using the media where accessible (or working with the municipal press office) and Internet, providing detailed information, which stresses the interest in child participation and avoids taking the lead role and concentrating on particular cases. It must be done from the beginning so that everyone can understand the importance we wish to attribute to the project. Clearly, this importance must also be reflected in the availability of councillors and the Council’s Chief Executive Officer to meet and discuss the proposals with the children.

- Whilst disseminating the project, it must also be borne in mind that the contents and channels will also have to be adapted for an audience of children.

- **To fulfil the commitments undertaken.** This does not mean to say that everything should be done that the children ask. It means to provide information and a response when problems or requests arise. This should be done within a reasonable timeframe even though it may be to explain that the request or proposal presented cannot be met.

- **To share the knowledge acquired with other projects.** This applies to both children and adults. Both within the Council itself and in respect of other institutions. Sometimes school and environmental projects pursue similar aims and those undertaking them scarcely know each other, let alone exchange information and experiences.

- **Learning is a continuous process.** There are initiatives that continue working for years and it appears that an optimum situation has been reached. There are others for which it seems that every four years a new participatory formula will be invented that nobody has previously discovered. In both cases, it should be remembered that learning is a continuous process, even for those who have started later.

It is clear that this selection of operating criteria may be developed. Every situation has criteria that are applicable in those circumstances. Our aim is to at least provide a basic guide to assist those only beginning or those who want to improve their experience.



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LET'S GIVE CHILDREN A VOICE



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