



A seat at the table

Investing in children's participation as a cornerstone of children's rights
Executive summary



JOINING FORCES
For All Children

ChildFund
Alliance



2024 marks the 35th Anniversary of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the world's most widely ratified Convention. Since its adoption, there has been a fundamental shift in how children are perceived and recognised - as people with their own rights, including, crucially, civil and political rights.

2024 will also see more than 4 billion people go to the polls.¹ While in the vast majority of countries, no children are eligible to vote, the outcomes of elections have ramifications for children and their rights. International law says that children have a right to be heard and adults have a duty to listen. The right to be heard is fundamental to fulfilling the full spectrum of children's rights, including children's civil and political rights, and is no less important than adult's right to express themselves freely about matters that affect them. Yet, against a backdrop of declining political rights and civil liberties, these rights are increasingly under threat.

Children consistently tell us – and show us - that they want to participate and take action on issues that concern them. Across the globe, children are contributing to the resilience of their communities, advancing their own protection, driving social progress, inspiring political change, and proposing innovative solutions.

Children's participation is a right in itself, but also a catalyst for the realisation of their rights more widely. Strengthening children's voice can increase their ability to claim other rights, provided that it is complemented with an enabling environment, where adult decision makers play a key role as a responsive and influential audience.²

With only six years remaining to achieve the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there is an urgent need to focus on, and invest in, children's participation. Doing so will not only help to address stalling progress on advancing children's rights, but also holds the promise of wider societal

benefits. Empowered and informed children grow up to become civically active and responsible members of society. Conversely, at a time of declining trust in public institutions – particularly among young people³ – and weakening social cohesion, there is a risk that not supporting and encouraging children's participation will contribute to a generation of adults that are disengaged from active citizenship and civic life.



The state of children's participation

Since the adoption of the UNCRC, there has been a growing understanding of, and commitment among decision makers to the value of children's civic participation. There are many documented examples, from across the world, of children's active participation in campaigns, policy processes and decision making at all levels.⁴

Many countries have developed legal, policy and programmatic frameworks, and mechanisms have been established to support children's participation in decision making at local, national, regional and global levels. These efforts have not, however, guaranteed effective and systematic implementation of children's participation. Even where child participation policies are in place, they are often not backed by sufficient and sustainable public investments in structures and systems. Advances are not translating into meaningful opportunities for all children to be heard.

This policy brief seeks to address this barrier to the systematic, meaningful and equitable participation of children in public decision making. Building on *Joining Forces'* 2021 report [We're Talking, Are You Listening](#), this brief aims to shed light on public budgeting of children's participation. Informed by consultations with children in seven countries, and a legal, policy and budgetary analysis of child participation in three of these countries, it presents insights and recommendations for governments on how children's participation can be embedded in structures and systems, and how legal and policy commitments can be translated into public budgets in ways which promote meaningful and ethical child participation.

Guided and inspired by what children have told us, *Joining Forces* agencies are mobilising around a Call to Action to demand greater financial investments and political will by governments and the wider international community for children's systematic participation in decision-making processes.

Joining Forces

As an alliance of the six largest international NGOs working with and for children to secure their rights and end violence against them, *Joining Forces* puts children at the centre of what we do; supporting children to raise their voices, take action as agents of change and hold us and duty bearers to account, ensuring children's experiences and views shape the solutions for the problems they face.

Child-focused organisations have played a critical role in promoting practical ways for children to be heard in different settings, and in fostering learning about how this can happen safely and meaningfully. We are working with children themselves, to build a wave of support for children's participation at local, national and regional levels that will carry through to global forums and complement global initiatives.



Specifically, we are calling on governments to:

- **Strengthen legal and policy frameworks guaranteeing children's right to be heard as well as their civil and political rights, as enshrined in the UNCRC.**
- **Establish and institutionalise structures and mechanisms for equitable and inclusive child participation.**
- **Invest in child participation mechanisms, across sectors and at all levels of government.**
- **Strengthen children's capacity, confidence and knowledge to participate in decision making.**
- **Support the capacity and willingness of adults to facilitate and enable children's meaningful and ethical participation.**



Endnotes

¹ National Democratic Institute, Global Elections Calendar Elections Calendar | National Democratic Institute (ndi.org) (accessed 15th February 2024)

² L. Lundy, 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', British Educational Research Journal, 33:6, 2007, 927-942.

³ R.S. Foa, A. Klassen, D. Wenger, A. Rand, A. and M. Slade. 'Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?' 2020, Youth_and_Satisfaction_with_Democracy-lite.pdf (cam.ac.uk).

⁴ See for example: Joining Forces, 'Joining Forces for Africa Summary Report', 2023, Final-Evaluation-Summary-Report-October-2023-1.pdf (joining-forces.org); Joining Forces, 'Joining Forces for Africa Project Thematic Review: Joint national level advocacy to change or approve laws and policies', 2023 JOFA-Project-THEMATIC-REVIEW-Joint-national-level-advocacy-to-change-or-approve-laws-and-policies-1.pdf (joining-forces.org), European Commission, Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life, 2021, Microsoft Word - Child Participation Final Report Revised 28.04.2021 FINAL.docx (europa.eu)



In 2017, the six largest child-focused agencies: ChildFund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children's Villages International, Terre des Hommes International Federation, and World Vision International joined forces.

We aim to use our collective power to accelerate change to secure children their rights and end violence against them.

We will pilot and scale innovative and effective approaches worldwide and be driven by the voices and needs of children.

