

# DEFINING CHILD PARTICIPATION

The definitions of child participation vary according to certain features of the context in which they are used. For example, a broader definition describes participation as 'any form of social engagement', and on the other hand, a more specific definition refers to participation as 'taking part in decision-making processes'<sup>3</sup>.

For World Vision, child participation is when children under 18 years of age contribute to decisions and take action on issues that affect their lives. This is best done through empowering children and nurturing positive relationships amongst children, adults and communities based on mutual respect and partnership at familial, local, national and international levels<sup>4</sup>. World Vision's definition is consistent with other international definitions that establish a new paradigm to the status of children and young people by recognising them as subjects of rights.

For an international policy perspective, Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) frames the concept of child participation as follows:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 12 includes two pivotal rights: the right to express a view and the right to have the view given due weight. The right to express a view freely means that children have the right to express relevant perspectives and experiences in order to influence decision-making. In this context, 'freely' means expressing a view is a choice, not an obligation and it is coercion-free. Furthermore, this right also includes a requirement for State Parties to listen to the views of children and facilitate their participation in all matters affecting them within the family, schools, institutions and judicial procedures.<sup>5</sup>

The right to have the view given due weight implies that when children express their views, this can be done in many different ways and with no restrictions on age or maturity—and their opinions will be considered regardless.<sup>6</sup> Children do not have the duty to prove their maturity in order to give their views; on the contrary, the State Parties and decision-makers have the obligation to ensure the implementation of this right by listening to the views of the child and finding the best ways for children to express their opinions.

In order to expand the concept of participation outlined in Article 12, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comments 12 defined child participation as an 'ongoing process, which includes 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.'<sup>7</sup>

3. Thomas, N. (2007). 'Towards a Theory of Children's Participation', *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 15(2), pp. 199–218.

4. World Vision International (2012). *World Vision's Guidelines for Child Participation*.

5. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). 'General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Geneva).

6. Lundy, L. (2007). "'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child", *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), pp. 927–942.

7. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). 'General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Geneva).

This definition embraces the notion of child participation as a process but also as an outcome, which has three pivotal components<sup>8</sup>: (1) impact in decision-making; (2) mutual respect between children and adults; and (3) joint learning process. The Committee definition requires distinguishing between individual or collective participation of children in order to frame the outcomes of their interaction with others.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, the inclusion of a decision-making feature implies the presence of a collective component, where groups of individuals seek to influence decision-making and bring about change.<sup>10</sup> This component does not mean that children's participation is an outcome determinant but denotes that participation is taking part with the knowledge that the actions will be taken into account and may be acted upon.<sup>11</sup>

The second component, mutual respect between children and adults, refers to an ethical and political commitment to sharing information amongst children, young people and adults, which implies an interdependent relationship.<sup>12</sup> Joint learning processes are about exchanging information between children and young people themselves and between children and adults.<sup>13</sup> This concept has been embraced by several child-focused organisations. For instance, World Vision 'believes that facilitating child participation is an opportunity to strengthen the natural networks of intergenerational relationships in communities, and to support interdependent relationships based on mutual trust and reciprocity.'<sup>14</sup>



The CRC's and the Committee on the Rights of the Child definition of participation gives a new status to children and young people by recognising them as subjects of rights which are entitled to be heard and can participate in decision-making. This definition produces a substantial shift in the nature of the relationships amongst children, young people and adults<sup>15</sup> where they are recognised, for the first time in history, as having the right to participate.<sup>16</sup> Participatory rights have been subjected to sustained criticism in relation to the complexities and limitations of the intergenerational relationship, lack of sustainability, tokenism and exclusion.<sup>17</sup> Research and practice have revealed the difficulty to practise these rights. Despite the intentions of Article 12, children still experience enormous limitations, discriminatory traditional practices and exclusion that prevent them from exercising their right to participate in decision-making. Practitioners and scholars have developed several models to address those issues.

8. Tisdall, E.K.M. (2014). 'Children Should Be Seen and Heard? Children and Young People's Participation in the UK', *Children and Young People's Participation and Its Transformative Potential: Learning from across countries* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke), pp. 168–188.
9. Ibid.
10. Burke, T. (2008). *Listen and Change: A Guide to Children and Young People's Participation Rights* (Participation Works: London).
11. Boyden, J. and Ennew, J. (1997). *Children in Focus: A Manual for Participatory Research with Children* (Radda Barnen: Stockholm).
12. Wyness, M.G. (2012). 'Children's participation and intergenerational dialogue: Bringing adults back into the analysis', *Childhood*, 20(4), pp. 429–442.
13. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). 'General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Geneva).
14. World Vision International (2015). *Child and Youth Participation Strategic Direction* (World Vision: New York).
15. Tisdall, E.K.M. (2013). 'The Transformation of Participation? Exploring the Potential of "Transformative Participation" for Theory and Practice around Children and Young People's Participation', *Global Studies of Childhood*, 3(2), pp. 183–193.
16. Verhellen, E. (2000). *Convention on the Rights of the Child: Background, Motivation, Strategies, Main Themes* (Coronet Books Incorporated).
17. Tisdall, E.K.M. (2013). 'The Transformation of Participation? Exploring the Potential of "Transformative Participation" for Theory and Practice around Children and Young People's Participation', *Global Studies of Childhood*, 3(2), pp. 183–193.

## 2.1. Child Participation Models

Current child participation literature offers several models of participation such as the Hart's Ladder of Participation, Treseder's Degrees of Participation, Shier's Pathways to Participation, Lansdown's Model of Participation and Lundy's Model of Participation. For the purpose of this discussion paper, the Lundy model will be used as an appropriate guide to understanding child participation based on the definitions provided by the CRC and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

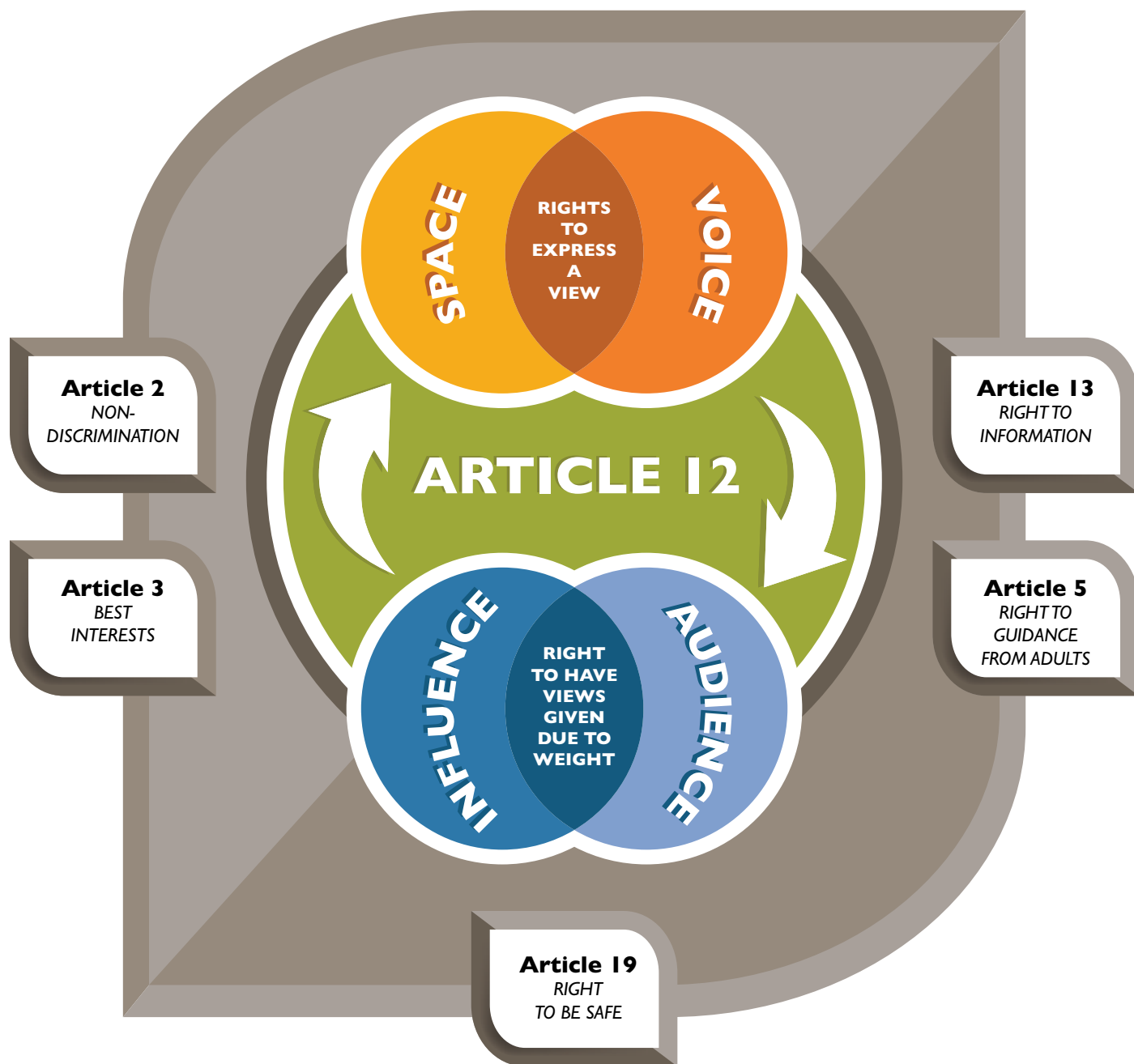


Figure 1: Lundy's model

This model also helps campaign teams at the national, regional and global levels to raise awareness amongst key stakeholders and decision makers on the critical components of the right to participate and establish the mechanisms to ensure that children and young people have the space to express their views. Using this model will help to determine how spaces have been created for children and young people's participation; what mechanisms are in place to ensure that their voices are validated, how strategic audiences have been selected, and how and when their views have been taken into account in decision-making processes.

Based on this model, the



campaign, for example, should include the following minimum standards:

## SPACE

- Spaces have been created through consultations and debate to include children and young people's opinions in the campaign strategy design.
- Meaningful, inclusive and safe spaces have been established to ensure that children and young people can participate actively in different campaign initiatives.
- Spaces are created from the local to national to global level to include children and young people in the campaign, ensuring fair representation of children: gender, age, different abilities, urban/rural.

## VOICE

- Children and young people have been provided with information and appropriate methodologies to engage in the campaign according to the contexts and maturity of participants.
- Participation is free and voluntary. Any child and young person can choose to opt out at any time.
- Children and young people are encouraged to propose their own ways in which they want to participate.

## AUDIENCE

- Communications channels are established to ensure children and young people's opinions are taken into account.
- Launch events, panel discussion and high-level debates include the active participation of children and young people.
- The selected audience engage meaningfully with children and young people.

## INFLUENCE

- Children and young people's opinions are incorporate into the campaign design strategies.
- Children and young people's ideas are framed in projects or action; e.g. Young Leaders project.
- There is an accountability mechanism in place to provide feedback to children and young people.

## CASE STUDY: INDIA

*Excerpt from a speech delivered by a young person at the UN General Assembly Thematic Debate on Inequality*

My name is Nisha. I am from India, here to represent the children and youth. I am 15 years old. Today I would like to focus on some inequalities faced by children.

I will start with my story. I was born with a problem in one of my legs. Now, one of my legs is much shorter than the other. When children are born with health problems, many parents cannot afford to help them. My parents did not have a lot of money. But they did not give up and took me many places for help.

I am lucky. Now I can move and walk because I wear an artificial leg. I am proud to represent the voices of children like me who face inequality every day. I feel sad to say that children all over the world are still not treated with dignity and equality in spite of the world moving so forward. It is a paradox. Many children are not educated and not included in the society because they are poor, disabled, or girls. They are invisible in the society. The rich people stay in their rich houses and do not help the poor. They keep the poor separate. The children from poor backgrounds face more problems.

It is really bad if you are a girl. Compared to boys, girls are not allowed to do many things that boys are allowed to do, like attend high levels of schools. They suffer all kinds of abuse, both physical and mental. Their parents think that they are a burden to the family. Even their own family members abuse them.

People don't see the poor children, disabled children, girl children. People don't see that we have many talents and abilities. I am here to say that we have beautiful hearts and hopes and want to soar in the sky. I don't want other children to face the problems I faced. Children need the same opportunities, whether they are rich or poor, boy or girl, disabled or not. We all have talents. I have one leg but my favourite thing to do is dance.

I want to end with a question I had when I was asked to come here: Will YOU listen to the voices of children? What impact will my words have?

Nisha



## Children as competent social actors

An important concept in child participation is the notion of children as competent social actors, which has been embraced by the sociology of childhood and has been fully endorsed in childhood literature.<sup>19</sup> This means that children are considered actors who are competent to make decisions, are active players in their contexts, and actively form independent social relationships and cultures.<sup>20</sup>

The sociology of childhood draws attention to the concept that childhood is socially and historically constructed.<sup>21</sup> In other words, different realities are built from the interactions that children have with each other and their environment, which is an ongoing process to construct their everyday life

and meanings through their actions.<sup>22</sup> Children's experiences are mediated by the discourses that they are able to access, and these discourses affect children's worldviews and how they interpret reality.<sup>23</sup>

Perceiving children as agents of change and competent social actors means they need opportunities to participate in decision-making processes at different levels in families, schools and communities.<sup>24</sup> However, to achieve this, adults must create opportunities for children to make choices and to include their voices, so as to enhance their ability to contribute to society.<sup>25</sup>

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21. Tisdall, E.K.M. (2014). 'Children Should Be Seen and Heard? Children and Young People's Participation in the UK', *Children and Young People's Participation and Its Transformative Potential: Learning from across countries* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke), pp. 168–188.

22. Morrow, V. (2011). 'Understanding children and childhood', Centre for Children and Young People: Background Briefing Series, no. 1. Centre for Children and Young People (Southern Cross University: Lismore, NSW, Australia).

23. Spyrou, S. (2011). 'The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation', *Childhood*, 18(2), pp. 151–165.

24. Hanson, K. and Nieuwenhuys, O. (2013). *Reconceptualising Children's Rights in International Development: Living Rights, Social Justice, Translations* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).

25. Smith, A. (2002). 'Interpreting and supporting participation rights: Contributions from sociocultural theory', *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 10, pp. 73–78.