

CHILDREN'S
WORDS ARE
LEGITIMATE

Together: Strengthening Child and Youth Participation in Public Decision- Making

Final project publication



SOS CHILDREN'S
VILLAGES



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Together

STRENGTHENING CHILD AND
YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN
PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING

1. Project overview

As enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, **all children and young people have a right to be heard** and their voices should feed into policy and decision-making at all levels of government. The meaningful participation of children and young people in public decision-making is essential to understand what their needs are, and how to work together to shape inclusive responses on all topics that affect them.

However, as reported within the consultation conducted with 10,000 children for the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee, **more than half of children from the EU feel they are never consulted by more distant authorities** such as the local municipality or authority, the national government, or the EU (UNICEF, 2020).

This is further **exacerbated during times of crisis and emergency**, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the cost of living crisis, where the voices of children and young people are often inconsistently sought or taken into account despite their lives being strongly impacted by decisions taken by governments.

Unfortunately, **for vulnerable children and young people, their voices are often further underrepresented** compared to those of children in the general population. These children, young people, and their families are often among those at highest risk of poverty and social exclusion, and often face other forms of disadvantage that create barriers for their participation in their communities. As such, their specific dynamics and needs are not always recognised or addressed, resulting in them lacking the appropriate support.

When children and young people contribute to or make decisions and influence change on their own, the decisions and resulting actions are likely to be more relevant to their lives and thus more effective. As **experts on their own lives, children and young people must be supported to participate meaningfully in public decision-making at all levels.** It is not only their fundamental right to participate, but their experiences make them key in identifying what good solutions look like.

Project objective

Through the project, "***Together: Working in partnership with children and youth to enhance their rights in responses to crisis situations such as COVID-19 and other emergencies,***" SOS Children's Villages aims to contribute to embedding children's rights in public decision-making across the EU, by empowering children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds to participate meaningfully in public decision-making on all matters that affect them, including in times of crisis.

Project partners

The project is led by SOS Children's Villages International and has been implemented by SOS Children's Villages in **Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, and Spain.**

At national level, the project activities have been organised with the support of National Steering Groups, which consist of a range of key stakeholders and local partners such as representatives from public authorities, social services, universities, other NGOs, among others.

Key activities

Throughout the project, we have developed and implemented:



A **peer-to-peer workshop programme** for children and young people aged 13-17, to build their capacity to participate meaningfully in public decision-making.



An **e-learning** to raise awareness among public decision-makers and professionals who work for and with children and young people, on how to improve child and youth participation in public decision-making.



Informative videos made for children by children and young people, in order to build their knowledge on their rights and how they can voice their views.



Informative webinars for professionals and public decision-makers to increase their knowledge on how children and young people want to be included in responses to emergencies.

A series of **advocacy actions** have also taken place with children and young people including the development and dissemination of **messages and policy recommendations**, the organisation of **exchanges** between children, young people, and public authorities to share their messages and recommendations, and the launch of an online **campaign for children**.

2. Participation of children and young people

The active and meaningful participation of vulnerable children and young people has been vital in ensuring that their voices shaped the content of all project activities.

The three key roles that were undertaken by children and young people on the project were:

Mentors

8 young people aged 20-27 who supported the development of the training methodology and materials and led the Training of Peer Trainers at a national level. The Mentors have also participated in the various steering groups at national and inter-national level.

Peer Trainers

10-12 young people aged 15-24 in each country who led the workshops for children.

Child and Youth Advisory Board members

Each national project team formed a Child Advisory Board and Youth Advisory Board, each with around **8-12 members aged 10-24**. Their role was to support the development and implementation of project activities at a national level, such as the videos for children.



Mentors from the Together project


Survey with children

At the start of the project, a survey was completed with **468 children and young people** aged 10-18 in Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, and Spain. The aim of the survey was to gather information on their awareness of their right to participate and the opportunities to participate in public decision-making in their country, how they would like to participate in public decision-making, and the key topics in which they would like to be involved in by governments and public decision-makers.

The findings of the survey showed that **children want to be informed of their rights and opportunities to participate in public decision-**

making, and the **key topics they would like to participate in decision-making on** are mental health, education, and peer on peer violence.

These findings were then used to inform the development of the peer-led workshops and videos for children.



"Adults often do not understand the point of view of children."

"We can express our views, and we should be heard."

"I want to be able to share my opinion openly."

Quotes from children who responded to the survey

3. Project activities and resources



The resources developed within the project are available in all languages of the national project partners. You can find all the available resources on the project webpage at <https://www.soschildrensvillages.org/together> or by using the QR code.

Peer-to-peer workshop programme



Within the project, a peer-to-peer workshop programme has been developed **for children aged 13-17** to learn to learn more about their right to participate in public decision-making processes, and to build their capacity to do so. These workshops are delivered by pairs of young people aged 15-24 who are trained as **Peer Trainers**.



The workshop takes place over 6 sessions, each lasting approximately 3 hours. The workshop uses interactive and experiential learning methods, and covers topics such as child rights and participation, public decision-making and decision-making processes, as well as tools for understanding the different levels child and youth participation.

Within the workshop, children and young people are asked to develop their own messages on topics that are important to them. In the final workshop session, the children then **meet directly with public decision-makers** and other professionals who can support their participation (e.g. teachers, social workers, etc.) in order for the children to **present the messages** they have developed and start to put into practice what they have learned about during the workshop. You can find an overview of these messages at the end of this booklet.

Within the project:

- **49** Peer Trainers were trained.
- **24** peer-led workshops were held.
- **443** children participated in the workshops.
- **737** children were reached indirectly through the workshops.¹
- **148** adults participated in the final workshop sessions.

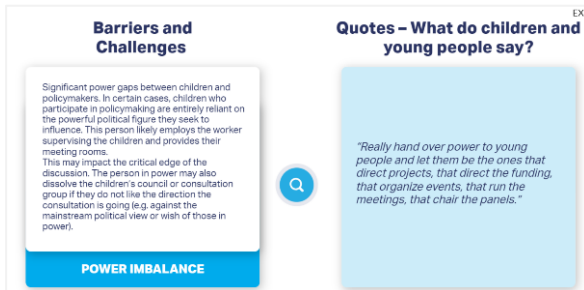
Webinars for adults



In each participating country, webinars were organised for professionals and public decision-makers to increase their knowledge on how children and young people want to be included in public decision-making, also in times of crisis.

¹ Children were reached indirectly through the workshops with a worksheet on the right to participate that each participating child was asked to complete with at least one peer in-between the workshop sessions.

E-learning for adults



For public decision-makers and professionals who work for and with children to better support the participation of children and young

people, an awareness-raising e-learning course on **"Meaningful Child and Youth Participation in Public Decision-Making"** has been developed.

It takes approximately 1-hour to complete and aims to remind and refresh adults with policy and decision-making responsibility of their duty to uphold children's rights by seeking children and young people's views and taking them into consideration when making decisions that affect their lives.

Within the e-learning course, participants learn about the International and European legal frameworks on children's rights, the challenges and benefits of child and youth participation, what meaningful child and youth participation in national policy development looks like, and practical tools and frameworks for assessing and implementing child and youth participation in participants' own departments or organisations.

Within the project duration, participants were also given the opportunity to submit questions on the topic of participation to the Mentors.

Videos for children



Four short videos for children and young people were developed based on scenarios created by the national Child and Youth Advisory Boards.



The topics of the four videos are based on the results of the survey answered by 468 children and young people at the start of the project, in which they stated that children should be informed of their **right to participate**, and the key topics they want to participate in are **mental health, education, and peer on peer violence**.



All four videos ask for adults to work together with children and young people to make decisions and create solutions that are informed by their views and opinions.



The videos also link to the **"Let our voices be heard!" online campaign** for children, which invites children to add their name to support the key

messages of the videos and calls on governments to provide opportunities for children and young people to participate and have their voices heard on all topics that affect them.

4. Messages from children and young people

Participation is a **fundamental right** that has been enshrined for the past 35 years in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Despite the recognition of participation as a right, **many children and young people still face significant barriers to meaningful involvement in public decision-making processes**. These barriers can include lack of access to child-friendly information, limited opportunities for engagement, and societal attitudes that undervalue the contributions of children and young people. Addressing these challenges is essential to fostering a more inclusive and democratic society.

As part of the peer-led workshops that were held with children and young people in Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy and Spain, children were asked to develop some **messages and recommendations** on the topics that are most important to them which they would like to participate in public decision-making on.

These word clouds show an overview of the messages that were shared by children in all four countries.

According to children, which groups of adults need to meaningfully listen to them and provide safe spaces for children's voices to be heard and considered in decision-making?

Teachers

City planners **Club leaders**

National governments

Child protection services **Caregivers**

Municipal governments

Cultural ministers **Educational services**

Community groups

Participation platform leaders

General public

What key topics do children want to participate in public decision-making on?

Recreation spaces
Career guidance **Education**
Peer violence Climate change
Pocket money Extracurricular activities
Participation spaces
Public spaces **Mental health**
Cultural events Public facilities
Finding employment Hygiene facilities
Tourism **Safe environments**
Attitudes towards children **School**
Environment **Discrimination**
Leaving care Trauma

What are the solutions children would like to see to support their participation in public decision-making?

Support of adults

Train teachers and other adults

Engage in discussions

More funding

No discrimination

Facilitate children's initiatives

Create spaces

Joint decision-making

Respect our views

Encourage participation

Actively listen to our needs

Give emotional support

Accept children as full citizens

Create opportunities

More collaboration

More attention to children

Better living conditions

Ensure diversity

Ensure accessibility

Improve facilities

Raise awareness

Organise events



For more information, please visit the project webpage:

<https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/together>

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