

**UNICEF submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child  
Day of General Discussion  
“To Speak, Participate and Decide – The Child’s Right to be Heard”  
Geneva, 15 September 2006**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Participation is the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured.*

- Roger Hart  
Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship  
Innocenti Essays No. 4  
UNICEF International Child Development Centre

*“We, the children, are experts on being 8, 12 or 17 years old in the societies of today. Nobody knows better what children actually need. To consult us will make your work more effective and give better results for children. My proposal is that you make children part of your team. It is good to see that so many children are represented in Government delegations here at the Special Session. I hope that every government will include children when you now make your national plans of action.”*

- Heidi Grande  
17, Child delegate from Norway  
UN Special Session 2002

### 1.1. Child participation and the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, enshrines participation as a fundamental principle that guides all other rights in the Convention. As such, participation is not a gift or privilege bestowed by adults on children, but the right of every child capable of expressing a view – especially the most marginalized and excluded in society – to be heard, as provided in Article 12 of the CRC. The fulfilment of this right is closely linked to the realization of other rights, in particular the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), and the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly (Article 15). Child participation must also be informed by, and implemented in conjunction with, the other guiding principles of the CRC – non-discrimination, best interests of the child, and right to life, survival and development.

As a consequence, by ratifying the CRC, State Parties have subscribed to the obligation to ensure children’s participation in the development of their laws, policies and practices. This obligation extends to all duty bearers, including parents, care-givers, educators, communities, religious leaders, civil society organizations, etc.

### 1.2. Global commitments to participation

The right to express oneself and be heard is also set out in numerous other international instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27)<sup>1</sup>, the UN Declaration on the Right to Development

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<sup>1</sup> The Preamble to the Declaration states that “the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. United Nations General Assembly, *Universal*

(Article 1)<sup>2</sup>, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Article 7)<sup>3</sup> and the Millennium Declaration (Article 25)<sup>4</sup>. As such, the right to participate freely, effectively and meaningfully is a right of children in all countries as human beings and as social actors. They are entitled to declare their views to the rights to freedom of expression, thought, conscience and association.

In 2002, the world again focused on its obligation to protect and fulfil a child's right to participation when it adopted the principles and objectives set out in 'A World Fit for Children' (WFFC) at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children. During this historic meeting, States parties dedicated themselves to listen to children and ensure their participation, and reminded themselves that "[c]hildren and adolescents are resourceful citizens capable of helping to build a better future for all. We must respect their right to express themselves and to participate in all matters affecting them, in accordance with their age and maturity."<sup>5</sup>

### 1.3. Participation as a guiding principle in UNICEF

As one of the world's leading agencies on children, UNICEF champions the child's right to survival, development, protection and participation. UNICEF views its obligation to promote the participation of children and adolescents as one of its guiding principles. UNICEF advocates for child participation, with a special focus on the most vulnerable, to become a fundamental component of all decision making processes affecting children, including in situations of conflict and crises. This advocacy includes supporting States parties and partners in the design and implementation of policies and programmes that affect children's lives, so that they enable the views of girls and boys to be taken into account during the process.

UNICEF strives to institutionalize meaningful child participation, in accordance with their evolving capacities, in judicial, administrative and broader societal settings – at the family, community, regional and national levels.

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*Declaration of Human Rights*, New York, 1948, Preamble. The provisions of this Declaration note the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." Ibid., Article 27(1).

<sup>2</sup> The Preamble to the UN Declaration on the Right to Development recognizes "that development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting there from." United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration on the Right to Development*, New York, 1986, Preamble. The text of Article 1 (1) reads: "The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized." Ibid., Article 1(1).

<sup>3</sup> "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right... to participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof ... and to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country." United Nations General Assembly, 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women', New York, 1979, Article 7. This part does not deal specifically with exclusion and discrimination against girls and women; however an important standard and ethical consideration is equity in participation, including equity between women and men, and girls and boys.

<sup>4</sup> The Millennium Declaration reaffirms the commitment "to work collectively for more inclusive political processes, allowing genuine participation by all citizens in all countries. United Nations, *Millennium Declaration*, New York, 2000, Article 25. "Children and young people are included as 'citizens'.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 'A World Fit for Children', New York, 2002, para. 7(9).

UNICEF appreciates the CRC Committee's decision to devote this year's Day of General Discussion to fostering a deeper understanding of the content and implications of the CRC as it relates to Article 12 – the child's right to have his or her views heard. On the eve of the fifth anniversary of the UN Special Session on Children and the 'A World Fit for Children', this year's discussion is particularly timely and relevant. It also fittingly follows on the discussion held in 2004 on 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood', which included a dialogue on children's ability and right to communicate their needs and preferences from birth.

This submission proposes an overarching framework, guiding principles and implementation areas to assist States parties in their efforts to effectively and meaningfully support the participation of all children – including the most vulnerable and marginalized – in their judicial and administrative structures and in society more generally. The submission also examines the value of child participation for children themselves, society and States parties and explores the benefits of child and adolescent participation, based on UNICEF's experience around the world.

## 2. THE VALUE OF PARTICIPATION

Participation means:

- Consulting with children
- Contributions of children and young people
- Children and young people make important decisions (personal and public)

**Participation is a human right.** As previously stated, the CRC and other seminal human rights instruments affirm that participation, understood generally as the right to declare one's views and have them taken into account, is a human right of all children.

**Participation is critical to self-development.** Participation sets off an ongoing sequence of self-development. Through participation, children and young people develop skills, build competencies, form aspirations, gain confidence and attain valuable resources. The more one participates meaningfully, the more experienced, competent and confident one becomes. This personal development in turn puts the individual in a position to participate more effectively in all settings--local, national and global.

**Participation fosters learning, builds life skills and enables self-protection.** All people, including children, learn best through interaction and participatory learning. Children who are encouraged to express their opinions and to be assertive will be more likely to have higher self esteem and develop a position of confidence. They will be better equipped to deal with abusive, threatening or unfair situations because they will be in a better position to seek advice, exit a harmful situation when necessary, or cope creatively when there is no exit. In this sense, participation is crucial for protection and can enable a community and *all* its stake holders to contribute meaningfully to emergency preparedness, relief and reconstruction.

**Children and young people can make a positive contribution to society.** Children and young people contribute to society in many ways, including by helping in domestic chores, securing the economic livelihood of families, taking care of elders, nurturing and playing with siblings, and caring for their health and environment. Given a voice, children can provide extremely useful information about hazards in their environment, conditions at work or school, and risks to the health of themselves and their community. For these reasons, children should be involved, commensurate with their evolving capacities, in all phases of decision making, including research, monitoring, evaluation and planning.

**Children and young people’s participation contributes to civil society development.** Children and young people’s involvement in teams, groups, clubs, committees, NGOs, boards, unions and other types of associations, both with and without adults, can strengthen the community and civil society. This type of involvement can help children and adolescents learn how the world works and what can be done to make it better so they can contribute significantly to community development. Participation by children with diverse backgrounds can build a sense of belonging, solidarity, justice, responsibility, caring for people in need, and sensitivity towards people who are different. This experience can revitalize a community and help promote values and practices of tolerance, democracy and community solidarity.

**Participation is integral to the democratic ethos.** Democracy demands that all citizens be able to take part in establishing the government and institutions in society. Excluding children and young people would mean robbing half the world’s population of the opportunity to exercise their citizenship, and the right to have their interests taken into account. Opportunities to participate in shared decision making, listening to different points of view and weighing options and consequences can help children deal with a variety of present and future issues, such as resolving conflicts peacefully at school, sharing food and household chores equitably in the home, negotiating conditions in the workplace and assessing political options during elections. The experience of participation builds an essential aptitude for dealing with different contexts and situations; a child cannot experience life in an autocratic manner for 18 years and then suddenly begin to act democratically in adult life.

### 3. GUIDING PRINCIPLES ON PARTICIPATION

#### 3.1. A human rights-based approach to participation

As shown previously, participation is the non-negotiable right of all humans, including children and young people. Applying a rights-based approach to programming means placing children, particularly girls, poor, disabled and marginalized children, and others whose voices are rarely heard, at the centre of our efforts and recognizing them as right-holders and social actors. Within the context of the CRC’s definition of the child as a person who is any age up to 18 (Article 1)) and the concept of evolving capacities (Article 5), a human rights-based approach to participation has no lower age limit, but is the right of all children from the earliest age, taking into consideration the child’s capacity according to his or her development and age. It also involves recognizing governments as primary duty bearers accountable both to their citizens--including children--and to the international community.

A human rights-based approach to participation implies five key roles for children and young people, with a focus on the disadvantaged and marginalized children and special efforts to ensure that girls are able to assume these roles as well as boys:

1. Identifying unfulfilled rights and acting on them
2. Claiming rights
3. Identifying capacity gaps in rights not realized and duties not performed
4. Participating in the implementation of solutions
5. Involvement in monitoring, evaluating and reporting

A human-rights based approach also requires a shift away from ‘events-based’ approaches to child participation and toward a focus on institutionalizing the participation of children and young people in all structures and processes in different settings – both in government and civil society. Doing so involves building

children's and young people's capacities for participation, while promoting an environment that assists them to do so safely and responsibly. It also requires raising awareness of the benefits of participation, demonstrating, for example, how schools and health facilities that adopt 'child and youth-friendly' practices can attract more young people and achieve better results.

### 3.2. A developmental approach to participation

Participation is central to the developmental approach - development defined as *"a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy"*<sup>6</sup>. The goal of development is to allow all individuals to be free and able to choose and live the sort of life they want to live. A community can be considered developed to the extent that it ensures that its entire people, including children (girls and boys alike), are in a position to participate and shape a life of dignity.

At its core, a developmental approach fostering meaningful participation emphasizes investing in children's and young people's 'assets' and 'protective factors', or safe environments, as opposed to focusing on young people as 'problems' and 'disasters waiting to happen'. Children and young people must be seen as stake holders and partners with great capacity to contribute to their communities and national development programmes, when given relevant and substantive opportunities to participate.

A developmental approach also views participation as part of a process of personal and human development. A child whose active engagement with the world has been encouraged and supported from the outset will be a child with the competencies to develop better through early childhood, respond to educational opportunities and move into adolescence with confidence, assertiveness and the capacities to contribute to democratic dialogue and practices within the home, school, community and nation. The CRC rightly emphasizes children's rights. As the work on adolescent development and participation is showing, from the programmatic and policy perspective we have to equally focus on adolescent development, on their responsibilities and on their contributions. This dimension of 'participation' tends to come out much clearer in relation to adolescent girls and boys rather than in relation to children.

Participation is also important for guaranteeing developmental programmes. This principle has been adopted as a 'common understanding' within the UN system, which states that *"development cooperation contributes to the development of the capacities of 'duty-bearers' to meet their obligations and/or of 'rights-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.

### 3.3. Ethical principles for meaningful participation of children and young people

There are numerous instances wherein participation is tokenistic and manipulative, or are harmful to children, such as in child conscription. As such, basic ethical principles of participation must be agreed before children and young people's participation can be effectively supported and promoted. UNICEF proposes the following principles:

- The CRC's principles (especially the 'best interests of the child') should guide the purpose and approaches to participation by children and young people in policy development and programming.

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<sup>6</sup> Sen, A., "Development as Freedom", First Anchor Books, August, 2000

- The CEDAW article 7 which reinforces the same opportunity and right to participate for women and men, girls and boys.
- 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, with respect for them and their roles.
- Participation needs to ensure that the rights and roles of children marginalized and made vulnerable (based on their age, gender, ethnicity, economic or social status, etc.), and children in difficult and emergency situations, are respected and represented.
- Children and young people should give ‘Informed consent’ on the action and their respective roles and responsibilities.
- Safety and protection for children must be ensured in all circumstances – especially in the process of their participation.
- Information, research and its use must be kept confidential, when required.

## 4. THE FRAMEWORK FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

### 4.1. Objectives

Based on these ethical guiding principles, State Parties, development agencies and civil society organizations need to focus on two key objectives in their efforts to promote child participation. These objectives are:

- a) *The institutionalization of child participation*: Shifting participation from event-based approaches to the institutionalization of participation opportunities in home, school, communities, judicial and administrative settings and society more generally; and
- b) *The participation of the most vulnerable children*: Promoting meaningful and authentic participation by children and young people with a special focus on disadvantaged and marginalized children, the poor, disabled, girls and children in situations of conflict.

### 4.2. Institutionalization of Participation

Institutionalization means:

- develop skills and capacities for participation among children; girls and boys, and adults
- allocate resources (people, money, time, facilities...) for children's participation
- develop structures and mechanisms for child and youth participation

Children should first and foremost be invited to participate on issues relevant to their own experience and wider environment – home, school, community - and their participation should progressively be institutionalized.<sup>7</sup> Institutionalization of child participation aims to ensure that the participation of girls and boys is authentic, meaningful, culturally-sensitive and beneficial both for their personal development and for the development of their communities. It encourages the participation of children and young people by developing participation

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<sup>7</sup> See General Comment No. 1 on The Aims of Education (Article 29(1)), which states: “*The participation of children in school life, the creation of school communities and student councils, peer education and peer counseling, and the involvement of children in school disciplinary proceedings should be promoted as part of the process of learning and experiencing the realization of rights.*” CRC/GC/2001/1, Para. 8.

spaces' for children in their daily lives--within their families, schools and communities. Institutionalization also expands opportunities for children to influence national policies and planning, by being involved in structures and processes at local and national levels.

The reporting process of the CRC, National Plans of Action implementation and monitoring, Poverty Reduction Strategies, Sector Wide Approaches, etc. are key opportunities for children to participate and develop the capacities needed to effectively engage in, and meaningfully contribute to, high-level policy and programmes. The importance of children and young people's involvement at the national level becomes even more pronounced in situations of conflict/post-conflict and transition when young people can actively contribute to building a peaceful and democratic society.

#### **4.3. Participation of the most vulnerable and marginalized children**

Special efforts are needed to ensure the genuine participation of children and young people from deprived and marginalized population groups, especially girls and young women. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable in many societies as they experience limited mobility and access to decision making. Girls often 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 the inequality and marginalization of adolescent girls. Additionally, very limited progress has been made for children with disabilities, 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 special and targeted initiatives are needed to create opportunities for those for whom otherwise those projects will remain inaccessible. Tackling participation among excluded children is integral to tackling exclusion itself.

#### **4.4. Programmatic approach**

In order to achieve the above proposed objectives, UNICEF offers the following programmatic approaches to child participation:

- a) Enlarging children's (girls and boys), and young people's *access to opportunities*
- b) Strengthening *capacities* of children and adults – including organizational capacities
- c) Providing children, girls and boys, with *safe and supportive participatory environments*.

Enlarging children's and young people's access to participation opportunities enables them to make an impact in their government, homes, schools and communities - through municipal councils, youth associations, the media and international conferences. Increasing the capacity of children, adolescents, adults and organizations to build supportive networks and partnerships that promote participation encourages sustainable participation and the systematic presence of youth in decision making processes. Duty-bearers (adults, parents, decision makers and the world community) have a moral and legal obligation to ensure the rights of children and adolescents and help them develop skills for advocacy in a supportive and safe environment. This obligation requires providing children and adolescents access to the information, skills and services needed to make informed contributions and decisions.

The need to provide for participation as early in childhood as possible is inherent within these approaches. Early participation strengthens both children's and adults' abilities to foster meaningful participation and allows children and young people to take on responsibilities. Sufficient time and space for participation is also important, as is insurance that participation processes are characterized by honesty and transparency and adapted to the child's developmental stage.

The structure and processes of child participation need to reflect democratic principles, including the equal value of every individual, respect for minority positions, and freedom of expression that is active, deliberative and safe from recrimination. By focusing on these three components, States parties and other duty bearers can set up the necessary conditions for effective child participation. The anticipated 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.

The following discussion on participation within judicial and administrative settings, and society more generally, is principally informed and guided by the above framework.

## **5. CHILD PARTICIPATION IN JUDICIAL & ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS (Workshop 1)**

### **National justice systems & political processes and national level policy making**

As a recent development in this area, while tackling other issues, this section lays the emphasis on child participation in conflict and post-conflict situations, within transitional mechanisms.

#### **5.1. National justice systems**

UNICEF gives priority to developing capacity and strengthening national justice systems in its Medium-Term Strategic Plan 2006-2009, and to ensuring that mechanisms are in place to provide protection for children and adolescents as victims, witnesses or offenders. Priorities include promoting the establishment or strengthening of 'child-friendly' and gender-appropriate investigative and court procedures, and the inclusion of internationally-accepted norms for child justice in laws and policies in all countries.

**Skill building for children, adults and officials:** UNICEF supports actors in the juvenile justice system to build their understanding of a child rights-based approach, and incorporate it into their work. UNICEF also aims to create a protective environment for all children. Achieving this goal requires a systemic, multi-level approach that includes securing government commitment, building capacities, reforming laws, monitoring and reporting rights violations, changing peoples' attitudes -- with special attention to those involved in law enforcement--building children's own skills and providing reintegration services where needed.

#### **5.2 Children and transitional justice in post-conflict situations**

**Participation toward peace-building in times of transitional justice:** Encouraging their participation in transitional justice systems helps children and adolescents become active partners in peace-building, helping to break the cycle of violence and re-establish confidence in the rule of law. However, their participation must be guided, supported and protected every step of the way.

**Truth commissions as innately participatory processes capable of involving the marginalized:** Truth commissions are participatory in nature, seeking to directly engage individuals, communities and civil society actors. This active community engagement creates opportunities for involving children and children's groups. Whereas judicial proceedings are likely to reach only a fraction of the perpetrators and victims of large-scale atrocities, truth-seeking mechanisms have the potential to involve many more persons in the process.

**Staff capacity building for peace-building:** Child rights advocates and humanitarian workers operating in different countries and contexts can play a key role in increasing the capacity of young people to participate in post-conflict community development and peace-building. Much more effort is urgently needed to create opportunities for children's peaceful participation in situations of armed conflict and post-conflict. The capacities of today's generation must not be wasted but rather channelled towards building peaceful societies with a culture of dialogue and respect of human rights.

**Measures to ensure safe child participation:** Children can play an important—even essential—role in a peace-building process, but procedures must be in place to protect their rights. Their safety and security must be a top priority, with their identity and confidentiality protected at all times. Their participation must be voluntary, with the informed consent of parents or a legal guardian. Of equal importance, children must understand their role in the process and it must be meaningful for them.

**Community participation in conflict and post-conflict countries:** Participation is especially relevant in conflict and post-conflict situations, when children and young people face multiple risks and may be targeted for violence, abuse and exploitation. Young people's involvement in community life provides alternatives to exploitation and violence and thus increases their own protection. Therefore, participation is a strong protective factor in situations of crisis and conflict.

**The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)** for Sierra Leone is a significant step towards the process of healing and reconciliation for all – victims, witnesses, perpetrators and families. Its main objective is to create an impartial record of human rights violations that occurred between 1991 and 1999 and make recommendations to the Government to prevent future conflicts.

Because children were among the primary victims of the civil war in Sierra Leone, their involvement in the TRC is essential. The challenge was to develop child-friendly procedures to ensure their protection, helping them feel safe when recounting their experiences and avoiding further trauma. UNICEF, together with other UN agencies and the Child Protection Network (CPN) – composed of national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government counterparts – helped to develop child-friendly procedures. These included, among others, special hearings for children, closed sessions, a safe environment for interviews, protected identity for child witnesses and the use of staff trained in psychosocial support for children.

### 5.3 Political processes and national level policy making

**Children as an asset to National Development Planning:** Children and young people represent increasingly larger percentages of the population in many countries. Thus, greater understanding of their situation, needs and concerns is critical for any National Plan of Action (NPA) to constitute a viable development plan. As

children are the people with the most direct experience and understanding of their peers, their participation must be seen as a key asset to any national planning process.

**Improved decision making through participation in the development of Poverty Reduction Strategies**

**Papers (PRSPs):** Children and young people's participation in the development of PRSPs can include: *contributing to policy dialogue* (doing research, providing information, expressing views, lobbying on the content), *contributing to implementation* (involvement in community-level implementation projects) and *monitoring and evaluation* (assessing whether budgets are reaching the local level, evaluating achievements). They can participate at various levels: in small-scale local community forums, by representation at district or regional initiatives, and at national-level consultations or meetings.

**Child participation in global advocacy:** Children and young people's participation has increasingly become an integral part of major national, regional and global events, conferences and campaigns. Clearly, many governments, local authorities, international agencies, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations value the positive contribution of children and young people, evidenced by their willingness to listen to their views and involve them where relevant and appropriate in decision-making and programme implementation. For example, at the 'Junior 8 Summit' in St. Petersburg, Russia in July 2006, which was supported by UNICEF, youth representatives met face-to-face with the G8 leaders to submit their views and recommendations on key issues and concerns impacting on their lives.

**Child-friendly approaches:** Governments need to take a range of steps to create the right environment for genuine children's and young people's participation in national level policy making. Initiatives should use a 'child-friendly' approaches to encourage children and young people's participation, involve children from the start and encourage their involvement throughout the whole process. Additionally, all the relevant information on children's issues and the NPA process should be provided in simple language and circulated widely (e.g. by radio or a special newsletter).

## 6. CHILD PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY (Workshop 2)

### 6.1. In schools

**Promoting democratic interaction and governance in schools:** The exercise of power in schools profoundly influences how young people construct their understanding of authority in larger society, including the functioning of democratic leadership. Interventions need to explore ways in which student participation can be enhanced at all levels of school governance. Areas for attention include: the formation of student councils that operate on democratic principles, young people's involvement on school boards and parent-teacher associations, a critical review of the roles of students as 'prefects' or 'monitors', and the creation of mechanisms that ensure student consultation when key decisions are made.

Curriculum reform and teacher training that promote democratic interaction help to transform children and adolescents into active learners instead of passive recipients, encourage creativity, and foster learning by hands on experience and experimentation. It is now well established that all people, including students, learn best through interaction and participatory learning; didactic and rote approaches are much less effective. Children and adolescents who are encouraged to express their opinions and to be assertive will be more likely to have higher self esteem and interact with others from a position of confidence.

**Reaching marginalized children and adolescents who are not in school:** Out of school youth need to be involved in identifying learning subjects to be covered, rather than having adults simply make assumptions about the types of skills that they need. Moreover, through active leadership, schools may be able to serve as “centres for sustainable development at [the] community level” by involving both students and out of school youth in participatory activities, including research, environmental care, health, education and lobbying. To be sustainable, these initiatives need to be attractive to disadvantaged adolescents, flexible in their requirements and cost-effective. Potential programmes for out of school youth include literacy classes, vocational training, life-skills, music, recreation, computer literacy and micro-credit management.

**Safe learning environments:** Priority must be placed on teacher training to ensure safe environments for both sexes. A violent environment profoundly erodes the self-esteem, confidence, initiative and sense of trust that are prerequisites for participation. Teachers are obviously central to reforming the structure of school interaction, and require maximum support to foster their ability to reorient their functioning. Programmes need to invest in teacher training and support, in the use of participatory pedagogy, in promotion of student governance and in how to respond to special student needs such as disability or sexual vulnerability.

**The Child-Friendly School (CFS)** approach has been adopted by the Sri Lankan Government, with UNICEF support, in the wake of the devastating tsunami in 2004 that wiped out or damaged many schools in Sri Lanka. Children gathered in a tsunami affected school in Sri Lanka’s conflict-ridden north east for a workshop with a colourful and highly visible outcome: large oil paintings on the walls in two classrooms, prepared by the children themselves.

Child participation was the key concept in this workshop that brought together teachers and children from eight schools in the Trincomalee district. Children themselves took the lead in drawing, drafting, sketching and finally painting their own pictures for the classroom walls.

Child participation is an inclusive process, based on the idea that everyone should have his or her say. At the same time, participation in decisions gives children a feeling of ownership of their school. That, in turn, will likely lead to higher school attendance and improved performance. Rehabilitating schools helps rebuild a protective environment for children by establishing normal routines within communities threatened by disaster and conflict. Participation in meaningful projects in post-emergency communities can be beneficial to the child’s self-esteem and confidence. UNICEF remains dedicated to working with children affected by disasters protecting their rights and encouraging their participation to rebuild.

## 6.2. Child and youth organizations and networks

**Involving youth associations in key processes:** Adolescents are increasingly selected and invited to participate in important review and decision making processes in their individual capacity. While this can be useful, it is often more valuable to mainstream involvement by ensuring youth associations are viewed as key stakeholders and members of decision-making processes. Done democratically, this can ensure that youth representation is informed by and accountable to the association membership, and allow for more steady engagement and follow up. Other types of involvement include parallel youth advisory boards that meet several times a year and provide advice to management and governing boards of organizations on which young people serve.

**Strengthening the capabilities of youth associations and promoting the formation of viable new ones:**

Increasing the number, types and capabilities of youth associations can enlarge the space for child and adolescent participation. Opportunities for youth associations to network across countries, through conferences, workshops and email, may further strengthen their capability. A youth club designed and organized by young people is more likely to command a great deal of attention, care and time from young people. School rules compiled in partnership with students are more likely to be relevant, understood and adhered to by them.

**6.3. Child participation in local communities**

**Safe community participation:** Careful consideration of the political dimension of children and young people's participation is critical, especially in humanitarian situations, in order to balance their right to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives and their right to be protected. This should be done by promoting appropriate, safe and constructive opportunities for children and young people's involvement in community development and peace-building.

**Participation in community decision making:** Decision-making can be both formal and informal. Interventions can seek ways to enlarge young people's opportunity to be involved in as many relevant decision-making processes as possible, strengthen their capabilities to do so effectively and support communities acceptance and encouragement of young people in their endeavours. Mainstreaming adolescent membership in key community bodies, such as local councils, school boards, water committees and security groups, is especially important to ensure that young people's involvement is systematized and cannot be excluded at whim.

**Societal capacity:** 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 level. Institutionalizing these processes in local administrative and social structures, including school management, village councils, local governance committees, and other structures are equally important. Partnerships with families and local communities will facilitate consideration of traditional and cultural constraints to children's participation. Partnerships with civil society organizations are key to reaching unheard children and young people.

**Participation by all stake holders:** 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. The empowering guidance and support of parents, teachers, care-givers, local authorities and local communities is then lost.

**7. PROVIDING A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT TO PROMOTE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

**Partnership to institutionalize participation:** Capacity building and the development of strategic partnerships with duty bearers (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.

**Sensitizing adults:** In order to create an 'enabling environment', the adults involved need to be sensitized to their important role in supporting children's participation, both that of girls and of boys'. This includes helping adults understand the importance and benefits of children's involvement, as well as the fact that the right to participation is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments.

**Child-friendly spaces at all levels:** Governments should be partners in creating child-friendly spaces, mechanisms and materials that prioritize the children's agenda in designing and implementing programmes on child rights. Furthermore, efforts at all levels are required to create an enabling environment in children's families, schools, communities, work place, media etc to ensure that girls' and boys' views are taken seriously.

**Inclusive communities:** Genuine and meaningful participation requires a radical shift in adult thinking and behaviour – from an exclusionary to an inclusive approach to children and their capabilities.

**Promoting the concept of youth-friendly communities:** Engaging adults and adolescents to debate, shape and manage their vision for their own community is critical to creating a supporting environment for adolescent development and participation. Interventions should seek to build as wide a supportive web as possible. In many communities it will be especially important to involve religious leaders because their support can be very valuable.

**Participation without fear:** When adolescents are in a safe environment and have opportunities to learn and express themselves without fear, they are more likely to engage with their parents, peers and communities. They gain self-esteem and become positive role models. National and regional Youth Forums are increasingly giving young people a platform to identify and express their opinions about issues that affect their lives. Young people are able to analyze their current situation and present their visions and recommendations to leaders for future action.<sup>8</sup>

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

**States parties, international agencies, NGOs and civil society organizations should:**

8.1. view participation as a process by which boys and girls develop skills, build competencies, form aspirations, gain confidence and attain valuable resources.

8.2. support the participation of children and young people to promote tolerance, community solidarity and democracy.

8.3. make child participation a central part of human development in order to *“expand the real freedoms that people enjoy”*<sup>9</sup>.

8.4. invest in children and young people as 'assets' in the family, school, community and society so that they are seen as 'stake-holders' and partners with great capacity to make a positive contribution to society.

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<sup>8</sup> See General Comment No.4 on Adolescent Health and Development, which states: *“In order for adolescents to be able safely and properly to exercise this right, public authorities, parents and other adults working with or for children need to create an environment based on trust, information-sharing, the capacity to listen and sound guidance that is conducive for adolescents' participating equally including in decision-making processes.”* CRC/GC/2003/4 (2003), para. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Sen., A., “Development as Freedom”, First Anchor Books, August 2000

8.5. ensure that the views of children (both girls and boys) are taken into account, in accordance with their evolving capacities and respect for ethical principles and standards, in the design and implementation of policies and programmes that affect their lives – including in situations of conflict and crisis.

8.6. focus special attention on the participation of children from the most neglected, marginalized and vulnerable groups and communities and take special measures to ensure the full participation of girls.

8.7. make participation a fundamental component of all decision-making processes affecting the child, striving to institutionalize meaningful child participation in judicial, administrative and broader societal settings – including family, community, regional and national settings.

8.8. advocate for and facilitate the meaningful participation of children and young people and their organizations and networks in the development of domestic legislation and international instruments on issues affecting children.

8.9. ensure that necessary safeguards are provided to protect children during judicial and administrative proceedings in keeping with the 'best interests of the child'.

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