



BEST PRACTICE MODELS OF CHILD PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING



Save the Children



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACRONYM	DESCRIPTION
CRC	Child Rights Centre
CSC	Community Scorecard
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CWD	Children with disabilities
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and/or Intersex
SCIK	Save the Children in Kosovo
ROR	Respect our Rights
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The project “Regional CSO Strengthening 2017-2021”, implemented by Save the Children in Kosova in cooperation with Save the Children Sweden and funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is a regional replication of its sister project in Kosovo, which aims ensuring children’s protection through establishment of responsive Child Protection (CP) systems and supporting Child Rights Governance (CRG) systems and mechanisms to be put in place regionally, namely in Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia. These efforts are mirrored in the main project objectives:

- Children are protected by a responsive child protection system, supported by a strong legislation.
- Systems, structures and mechanisms for implementing children’s rights are in place in program countries and governments are including CSOs’ and children’s’ voices in these processes.

The right of children to participate in decision-making in all matters that affect their lives is a well-established legal and constitutional principle and a critical element of building back better. Thus, children, should be involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of all relevant legislation, policies, services and programmes affecting their lives and at the community, local, national and global levels. Civil society has a crucial role to play in supporting children through these processes.

The pandemic has likely affected the work of the Save the Children and civil society stakeholders, including children, in the long term. It was both a challenge and an opportunity to rethink ways of inclusion of children in decision-making systems in program countries towards more safe, inclusive, meaningful and systematic engagement in all decision-making processes.

Save the Children in Kosovo commissioned an assessment on best practice models in child participation in decision-making for the “Regional CSO Strengthening 2017-2021” project. Data collection was done through desk research, and in-depth interviews, ensuring satisfactory data triangulation. The sample size was 15 respondents. The study covered CSO working in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia.

The research will explore the modalities, practices, barriers (both formal and informal) and opportunities to the meaningful and safe, direct and indirect, participation of children in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Ukraine, Serbia and Moldova throughout the implementation of the “Regional Civil Society Organizations Strengthening” project. This to inform how Save the Children and partners can improve and adapt their support to children’s participation in local, national and global decision-making and monitoring processes. Furthermore, the research considered how child participation, including online participation, has been affected – positively and negatively – during the COVID-19 outbreak and the long-term implications for our work on child participation.

This analysis will also identify good practices that should be leveraged in order to provide specific recommendations to strengthen processes and platforms for more systematic, meaningful and inclusive child participation, including by the integration of children’s voices in the decisions and recommendations.

This report gathers best practices in capacity strengthening of children to influence decision-making in Kosovo, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine encompassing recommendations on how these practices can be used to build back better systems of child participation.

The study covers topics, such as:

- Main improvements in children participation in decision making as result of the project intervention.
- Best practices in strengthening children participation in decision-making.
- Stage of legislation on Child Rights Governance in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia.
- Barriers to the meaningful and safe, direct and indirect, participation of children in decision making in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia.
- Opportunities for the meaningful and safe, direct and indirect, participation of children in decision making in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia.
- Impact of COVID-19 on child participation, including online participation, and long-term implications for future child participation.
- Recommendations to strengthen processes and platforms for more systematic, meaningful and inclusive child participation in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia.



Below are presented key findings, categorized according to the topics.

According to respondents the main improvements in children participation in decision making, as result of project intervention, and best practices in strengthening children participation in decision-making are:

- Establishing and functionalizing of children advocacy groups;
- Participatory approach- involvement of children throughout each phase of process/planning;
- Holistic approach- including parents, service providers and institutions in children advocacy groups;
- Community Scorecard - offering feedback to service providers and being part of the institutions decision-making on addressing the raised issues;
- Action plans – development action plans at local and national level;
- Establishing and functionalizing “Respect Our Rights” (ROR) group at national level;
- Municipal Children’s Assemblies – creating legal infrastructure for these groups to be functional and sustainable;
- Enhancing children’s participation in monitoring of Strategy/ Action Plans that affect child rights;
- Capacity building of children groups in order for them to increase their capacities to effectively participate in decision making;
- Ensuring that children groups are supported in their advocacy initiatives by different CSOs;
- Establishing and functionalizing different platforms of participation, including online platforms;
- Funding of projects developed by children;
- Developing guidance’s for children’s participation in decision making

According to respondents, as result of project intervention, and other positive developments, since 2017 the Stage of legislation on Child Rights Governance in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia has been significant improved:

- In **Kosovo** the Law on Child Protection has recently been approved and the Strategy for the Rights of the Child has been drafted.
- In **Serbia** the National Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence for the period 2020-2023 has been adopted, accompanied by Action Plan for 2020 and 2021.
- In **North Macedonia**, in 2019, the Law on Primary Education was adopted, which has improved the participation of children in decision-making within the school, making it mandatory to establish a Children's Parliament and an Ombudsperson for children in every school.
- **In all the countries** there is still a need to further strengthen the monitoring mechanisms at local and national level to ensure that children's rights are being respected and their well-being is guaranteed.

According to respondents, the barriers to the meaningful and safe, direct and indirect, participation of children in decision making in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia include:

- Child protection services do not respond adequately to specific needs of children, due to the lack of capacities of service providers to communicate effectively;
- Lack of political willingness of service providers to include children in decision making;
- Children lack in information on how they can contribute effectively in decision making;
- Some groups of children still remain very unrepresented in decision making bodies, such as children with disabilities, and children from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian community
- Institutions lack of the capacities and tools to effectively communicate with children, to gain their perspectives, and to effectively listen to their views.

According to respondents the impact of COVID-19 on child participation, including online participation, and long-term implications for future child participation is in the following areas:

- The state institutions, including service providers, did not have effective forms and methodologies for online communication with children;
- Children with disabilities (CWDs) and children from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities were impacted by COVID-19 in terms of their online participation were the most vulnerable groups;
- The lack of contact of children with their peers has further deepened the social isolation of children and hindered their participation;
- COVID-19 has affected the reduction of social contacts and opportunities for children to share their thoughts with decision-makers.





BACKGROUND

Kosovo has one of the highest poverty levels in South Eastern Europe, with a 20.7% child poverty rate. The impacts of COVID-19 on poverty are likely to be substantial in child vulnerability, as economic activity in Kosovo has been brought to a standstill and remittances plummeted. A significant number of people are likely to lose their jobs, especially those on fixed-term contracts, seasonal workers, and those working in the informal economy. Kosovo has a large construction sector, which is particularly sensitive because it is an important source of income for the urban poor and vulnerable. Indeed, projections suggest that 57,000-148.000 people could fall into poverty, while the middle class could shrink by as many as 100,000 people. This is equivalent to the poverty rate going up by 4-10 percent. Although social assistance is an important source of income for the (amounting to 15% 2017) and will to some extent protect the poorest from the crisis, more than half of people falling into poverty do not currently benefit from any social programme. It will be necessary to expand the coverage and possibly the generosity of the cash transfer programme to ease the effects of the collapse in incomes (Save the Children, 2020).

Key trends in **Kosovo** reflect slow progress on addressing children's needs through a holistic approach and weak coordination of mechanisms at local and central level to enable access to quality inclusive, integrated services. The legal framework guarantees the protection of fundamental rights, in line with international instruments and agendas. Despite legislative frameworks being largely harmonized with international standards and abiding to UNCRC language, information gaps exist in terms of monitoring country performance (i.e. Alternative Reporting on CRC) measured against such standards. The new Law on Child Protection promotes the best interests of the child and the explicit ban on the corporal punishment in all settings and mandates relevant governing bodies to initiate executive actions for implementing the Law at local level.

This is aimed to support the creating of clear mandates and accountability between the duty-bearers at national and local level.

In order to respond to local and international challenges, but also in line with the States Parties obligations set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Kosovo has put in place the Strategy and National Action Plan for the Rights of the Child 2009-2013.

Serbia continues to have high rate of people living in absolute poverty at 10% whereas South and Southwest Serbia remain the most economically and socially deprived regions. The unemployment rate is at 20.8% and the gap between supply and demand of skilled workforce that doesn't necessarily correspond to the needs of the economy. In terms of child rights legislation, Serbia still does not have the comprehensive Law on the Rights of the Child and an explicit ban on corporal punishment of children in the family environment. This results in the non-synchronisation of endeavours aimed at improving the position of children in Serbia. The adoption of these laws is important, as this was a recommendation provided to Serbia by the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child in two cycles, and by the recent UN Third Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council. In 2018, a working group formed within the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs compiled the Preliminary Draft Law on the Rights of the Child and the Protection of the Rights of the Child. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the position of children in Serbia, which is especially reflected in children from the most vulnerable groups - children with disabilities, migrant children, Roma children, children living and working on the streets, children with HIV/AIDS, children belonging to the LGBTI population and other vulnerable children.

In just two decades, the **North Macedonia** has made considerable progress in social and economic reform, establishing itself as an upper middle-income country. Poverty and unemployment persist in the country. Over a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line and the unemployment rate in the country is around 30 percent.

North Macedonia ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1993, and in 2003, adopting its two optional protocols (Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; Optional Protocol to

the Convention on the Rights of the Child, on child prostitution and pornography). Within the scope of its commitments, North Macedonia created a legislative framework in protection of child rights to ensure children are protected, learn and thrive.

This framework is comprised of the Law on Child Protection, Law on Family, Law on Social Protection, Law and Register of Convicted Sex Offenders, Law on Justice for Children and the Law on Prevention, Deterrence and Protection against Domestic Violence. Nevertheless, the institutional capacities and effectiveness of state mechanisms to implement the legislative provisions remain low. The report on the UNCRC expressed concerns that the national legislation does not fully comply with the principles and provisions of the Convention and that its enforcement remains weak.

Ukraine is facing its most serious challenges since achieving independence in 1991. The conflict in the east forced more than one million people to leave their homes to save their lives. In addition, COVID-19 aggravated the situation of children and families living in vulnerable situation as a result of loss of certain opportunities to earn and other social problems, including lack of access to educational and recreational services for children. Currently Ukraine is undergoing legislative reforms including decentralisation, police, healthcare and education. In the meantime, the economic crisis and armed conflict yet again has cast the child rights sphere aside. Although government bodies continued their work, including drafting bills and other regulations, the legislative reform process stalled as a result of the pandemic. Despite the existing legal ban on all forms of violence against children, such attitudes remain the norm for large parts of the society. At the same time, established mechanisms for combating violence and any kind of discrimination are not implemented in practice. As a result, degrading treatment against children in school and family setting still remain an everyday practice.

Despite the fact that the **Moldova** has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) for more than 20 years, not all the children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. One of the underlying factors behind the difficult situation for children is of economic nature, where low incomes and high unemployment rates put further stress on households with children, and where fewer funds are available for public expenditures.

In addition, political instability and deterioration of public system have a direct negative influence on the situation of children's rights in general and for children from disadvantaged background in particular. On the other hand, there are notable reforms, including in education and child protection system, which provide adequate framework for further development.

The main challenge for sustainable change is the implementation gap. As structures are in place especially at national level, yet, there is a lack of processes to transform laws and policies into practice of institutions and professionals, make national standards children's reality.

Although, progress in the area of child participation in decision making has been made, still a lot remains to be done in order to provide full scale participation of children. According to our findings there have been important efforts made in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia to address the issue of child participation.



The CSO Strengthening programme in Kosovo and in the Region was based on the following Logical framework:

Main objectives	
Children are protected by a responsive child protection system, supported by a strong legislation.	Systems, structures and mechanisms for implementing children´s rights are in place in program countries and governments are including CSOs' and children's' voices in these processes.
Specific objectives	
A meaningful child participation mechanism is existent and regulated at the local and national level to monitor children rights;	Social accountability dialogue practices used to improve access to quality child protection and education services;
Strengthen CSOs to advocate for increase in private sector accountability in Child Rights;	CSOs have technical and organizational capacities to engage in Child Rights monitoring and advocacy with children;
CSOs have the capacities to use and promote social accountability tools to enable the creation of responsive systems with children's priorities taken into account;	CSOs have technical capacities to introduce Childs Rights Business Principles CRBP;
Child led groups have capacities enabling their meaningful participation in decision-making processes;	Personnel working with children and parents/caregivers (including child psychologists, teachers, health and social workers, the police and others) have capacities;
Children, families and service providers understand and actively participate in social accountability dialogue.	



SCOPE OF ASSESSMENT

In line with the objectives of the “Regional Civil Society Organizations Strengthening 2017-2021” project and its focus to strengthen the capacities of CSOs and children to influence decision-making, Save the Children in Kosovo initiated an assessment aimed to provide the following information:

- Map the different modalities and practices of child participation in program countries developed as part of the project.
- Identify the barriers, both formal and informal, and share good practice examples of safe, inclusive and meaningful child participation (including of the most marginalized children) in program countries.
- Analyse the elements and processes required at the local and national level to support the engagement of children with national child rights mechanisms.
- Explore the opportunities and challenges with online child participation, including at the country level, as a potential longstanding approach for participation with all relevant safeguards in place.
- To develop recommendations for Save the Children, partner organizations and other stakeholders to enhance safe, meaningful and inclusive child participation in decision-making.



METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this assessment, both primary and secondary data sources were consulted. In terms of primary data sources, the study relied on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Data collection was done through desk research, and in-depth interviews, ensuring satisfactory data triangulation.

The methodology was chosen to accurately and conveniently capture all relevant data to the project evaluation's scope, as well as, as mentioned above, to ensure data triangulation. The methodology was also chosen to enable timely implementation, given local COVID-19 restrictions. Secondary data review – initially an intensive and comprehensive secondary data analysis took place. All study reports and M&E reports produced by SCiK were reviewed in order to understand the project progress toward objectives and targets. Review of indicator related results as per Logical Framework, reviewing of baseline and midterm evaluations, and other research reports produced by SCiK with support from Save the Children Sweden and funding from Sida.

The methodology also included review of relevant external literature on the state of children participation in decision making in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia. The specific focus has been put into researching the changes to legal infrastructure and their implementation in country level.

In-depth interviews – an interviewing guideline was designed by consultant in cooperation with SCiK team in order to ensure the relevance and quality of all questions. The interviews were administered through online platform using Zoom. Total of 15 persons/CSOs participated in study. The CSOs included in study were from Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia. For qualitative data we have performed data source triangulation, comparing to SCiK and other analyses and reports supported by Sida funded programs. All data collection activities took place between September 27th to 30th, 2021. In line with research questions, for this study it has been applied a purposive sampling procedure. Respondents included in the study are representatives of CSOs which have been directly involved in project implementation. The report contains findings, conclusions and recommendations. All findings are grouped as per research questions presented in the Scope of Assessment.





FINDINGS

I. Main improvements of child participation in decision making as a result of project intervention and best practices in strengthening child participation in decision-making

The CSO projects supported by the Save the Children in Kosovo programme implemented Community Scorecard, which aims to address the needs of children in various sectors such as education, health and well-being. Throughout these processes, children have been and continue to be key actors in offering feedback to service providers and being part of the institutions decision-making on addressing the raised issues. Also, CWDs are part of the working groups which monitor the implementation of action plans derived from this process.

It is worth mentioning that children have represented the voice of children with disabilities at the local, national and international level and that now some of them have been engaged in other child rights monitoring groups such as ROR and Municipal Children's Assemblies. In the projects in Kosovo, advocacy groups of children have been established, through which the awareness and capacities of children in advocating for their rights have been significantly raised and strengthened, while supporting the representation of children, as well as the increase of participation in decision making. Some projects in Kosovo, except with children, in parallel, they have worked with parents, service providers and institutions at the local and national level to raise their awareness regarding child rights and the involvement of children in decision-making. Formal child-led groups have been working on building their capacities to better respond to the needs of their peers, and by utilizing the knowledge and skills they acquired, they continuously advocate for the rights of the children and youth. A child-friendly municipality model has been promoted in two municipalities in Kosovo. As part of these

processes, protocols for exercising the child's rights at the local level have been adopted. Certainly, these protocols focus significantly on the improvement of participation at the local level. A children's council was established in 2020 as an advisory body to 'Megjashi, a partner CSO supported by Save the Children in Kosovo in Northern North Macedonia.

In terms of activities, members of the Children's Council were trained in child participation, participated in the process of writing a report on the state of the rights of the children in North Macedonia, which was submitted to the UNCRC and presented by children themselves at the 88th Pre-Session of the UN CRC. In 2020, the Government of Serbia adopted the Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence for the period 2020-2023, with the accompanying Action Plan for 2020 and 2021. During the drafting process, two public hearings were held and the CRC and DX Club took an active participation. Thereby, some of the main suggestions for the improvement of the Strategy provided by the CRC and DX Club were integrated. The representatives of the Child Rights Centre and the DX Club actively participated in public hearings and gave their suggestions for improving the Strategy.

The report on children's awareness of the risks of sexual abuse and exploitation via internet and available forms of protection in Serbia was prepared jointly by the Child Rights Centre, Children's Club DX and children from school parliaments in 3 schools in Belgrade – it was sent in June 2018.

The activities were planned in accordance with the set of methodological objectives adapted to the age of children (13-17 years) surveyed and involved in the preparation of the report, taking into account specific conditions of especially vulnerable groups – children from vulnerable families such as Roma and migrant children from economically deprived families (in cooperation with schools involved in the project).

Other workshops, included developing the Kahoot quiz on the topic which was prepared by members of DX Club. This process helped them to get introduced to the Lanzarote Convention and available protection mechanisms for children from all forms of violence, with a focus on sexual exploitation and abuse of children via the Internet, as well as to the work of the Lanzarote Committee, and how they can meaningfully

participate in the monitoring and reporting on the process of child rights delivery. In 2021, CRC received a thankful note from Lanzarotte Committee, and feedback that insights of children will be at the very beginning of the Committee's forthcoming report, and that a specific chapter will summarize their contributions.

In addition, key messages from their input will be prominently flagged in other chapters of the report and a certain number of recommendations of the Committee to States Parties will be specifically based on their suggestions. The Committee is planning to prepare a child-friendly version of the Report, and to involve children in this process.

II. Stage of legislation on Child Rights Governance in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and Macedonia

In legislative terms, Kosovo stands relatively well on Child Rights Governance. Kosovo Constitution recognizes the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Law on Child Protection has recently been approved and the Strategy for the Rights of the Child and Action Plan (2019-2023) has been drafted by the Office for Good Governance (OGG).

In Kosovo, existing monitoring mechanisms at local and national level that need to be further strengthened to ensure that child rights are being respected and their well-being is guaranteed.

Regarding the impact on legislation within the project, the process of amending the Standard Action Procedures for protection from domestic violence has been started, in order to integrate the specifics of children with disabilities, to facilitate the identification of cases of violence against CWDs by service providers.

The extracted material has been submitted to the relevant institutions and now with the start of their amendment we are advocating to include these specifics.

In **Kosovo**, in terms of legislation, we currently have adopted these legal acts that promote and guarantee equal rights for all children:

- *law on child protection no. 06 / I-084,*
- *administrative instruction -no. 01/2021 on the protection and treatment of children perpetrators of criminal offenses under the age of criminal responsibility,*
- *administrative instruction -no. 02/2021 on the application of child-friendly justice in criminal, civil and administrative proceedings,*
- *municipal regulations for child protection and care,*
- *municipal regulations on the establishment and structuring of the municipal assembly of children,*
- *municipal regulations for the realization of rights, protection and prevention of hard labor for children,*
- *regulation no. 01/2019 on special procedures for receiving, handling and addressing complaints submitted by children or complaints related to children's rights,*
- *administrative instruction no. 03/2017 on child safety seat, regulation no. 04/2016 on professional evaluation of children with special educational needs,*
- *administrative instruction no.01 / 2016 for amending and supplementing the administrative instruction no. 12/2012 on the composition and functioning of the panel for placement of children without parental care in family housing and adoption,*
- *Administrative Instruction no. 19/2016 on the inclusion of children in preschool institutions in Kosovo,*
- *regulation 01-110-85291 for the protection of children from actions that harm their health and development,*
- *administrative instruction no. 09/2014 on the regulation of adoption procedures for children without parental care,*
- *law no. 03 / I-022 for material support to families of children with permanent disabilities,*
- *law no. 03 / I-212 on labour,*
- *law no. 02 / I-17 for social and family services,*
- *law no. 03 / I-189 on the state administration of Kosovo,*
- *law no.2004 / 4 on health, law no. 02 / I-52 on preschool education,*
- *law no. 03 / I-040 on local self-government,*
- *law no. 2004/32 law on the family of Kosovo,*
- *code no. 06 / I-074 criminal code of Kosovo,*
- *code no. 06 / I-006 of juvenile justice,*
- *The Government of Kosovo is in the process of drafting 16 administrative instructions, which are derivatives of the Law on Child Protection.*

Serbia still does not have the comprehensive Law on the Rights of the Child and the Protector of the Rights of the Child, and an explicit ban on corporal punishment of children in the family environment. These important facts result in the non-synchronization of activities aimed at improving the position of children. The adoption of these laws is also important, as this is a recommendation provided to Serbia by the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child in two cycles, and by the recent UN Third Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council.

The National Action Plan for Children expired in 2015 and the Children's Rights Council of the Government of Serbia initiated the procedure for the establishment of the Working Group with the aim to develop a new Strategy in the field of the rights of the child and its Action Plan. The WG was formed on 12 April 2018 and the Director of the Child Rights Centre is one of the members. The process of the development of the new strategic document has not started yet due to the lack of financial resources. The members of the WG had a consultative meeting with the Public Policy Secretariat of the Republic of Serbia in April 2019 in order to determine the concept and concrete steps in developing the new Strategy in accordance with the newly adopted Law on Planning System of the Republic of Serbia.

In 2020, the Government of Serbia adopted the National Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence for the period 2020-2023 with the accompanying Action Plan for 2020 and 2021. This document is an important step in the process of strategic improvement of the protection of children from violence in Serbia, especially bearing in mind that the previous National Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence covered the period 2009-2015. The Strategy defines different types of violence and, unlike the previous one, it recognizes a larger number of environments in which violence occurs. In that sense, it also indicates that corporal punishment of children, with the aim to correct or control their behavior, is child abuse and that society has zero tolerance for corporal punishment.

This document also stresses the importance of special protection of children from vulnerable groups who are often exposed to multiple forms of violence, specifying that particularly vulnerable groups of

children are, among others, children in street situations, refugee children, migrant children, Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transexual or Intersexual children and Roma children. However, the Government of Serbia has not yet established a Working Group to implement and monitor the Strategy, nor have civil society organizations been nominated to participate in the process of monitoring the implementation of the Strategy and reporting on its implementation.

It is worrying that implementation of the Strategy has not started yet given that prevention of violence against children and their protection should be a priority in the field of the improvement of the rights of the child in the Republic of Serbia. CRC will continue advocating for consistent implementation of this Strategy. Although signed, the Third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure before the Committee on the Rights of the Child has not yet been ratified. The only recommendation regarding the realization of the rights of the child that the Republic of Serbia has noted was the one regarding the Ratification of the Third Optional Protocol. As a reason for noting this recommendation, it was pointed out that it is necessary to perform certain changes in the internal legislation in order to enable its efficient implementation, and that for this reason this Protocol has not been ratified, and that by signing it, the state of Serbia has shown its readiness to accept it. During 2020, Child Rights Centre used all fora to point out to the importance of this Protocol ratification and its implementation in Serbia.

The Children's Rights Council, as the only governmental cross-sectoral advisory body consisting of representatives of relevant line ministries, CSOs and independent experts, didn't organize any session in the period between 2020-2021. It is particularly worrying that this body failed to undertake any action during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the constitutive session was held, and Child Rights Centre is one of 26 members from various ministries, institutions, universities and non-governmental organizations.

The Child Rights Centre continues to advocate for a stronger role of the Council as it should be vested by sufficient authority to coordinate all activities related to the implementation of all rights of the child. Consequently, the provision of human, technical and financial resources is necessary for its effective functioning since this body presently has an advisory role only.

CRC participates at the sessions of the Council for Monitoring the Implementation of the Recommendations of the United Nations Human Rights Mechanism (Council) within the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue (until the parliamentary elections in June 2020, the Council was under the mandate of the Office for Human and Minority Rights).

This Council, as an inter-ministerial body, continuously monitors the implementation of the obligations undertaken by Serbia in the field of protection and improvement of the human rights situation. During 2020, the Council did not organize any session, and in 2021 two sessions were held. At the session held in September of 2021, CRC pointed out the importance of establishment of the thematic working group for support in developing periodic report on the implementation the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which was supported by the Council's members.

III. Barriers to the meaningful and safe, direct and indirect, participation of children in decision making in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia

The general lack of collective and institutional awareness on the importance of child participation in democratic processes and the exercise of the role of civil society is seen as a key factor aggravating barriers to meaningful and safe, direct and indirect participation of children in decision-making in their respective states. Insufficient budgeting of central and municipal governments regarding the realization of children's rights and participation in these activities characterizes all these countries.

Other formal barriers include: lack of proper transparency by institutions to inform parties about processes intended to discuss or develop plans for municipalities and ministries; lack of political will to establish mechanisms for child participation; the unwillingness of central and local institutions to involve children in decision-making processes that have an impact on their lives; the unwillingness of the incumbents to build the capacity of children and citizens to have sufficient knowledge of decision-making processes; lack of capacity and tools to communicate successfully with children, to understand their perspectives and to listen

to their views. Due to the lack of information from the incumbents on the time, place, date and manner of public consultation, there is a lack of direct or indirect participation of children in decision-making.

Also, societies in the respective states are largely patriarchal and, consequently, little attention is paid to girls' views and gender factors for equality in decision-making. Although some significant policies and measures enable children to participate, their voices are not heard enough. This results in decreased motivation of children and young people to get involved in decision-making processes. This barrier is even more pronounced in the most vulnerable groups, thus making their level of participation even lower. The dominant mentality that children may not be mature enough to decide for themselves consistently, through every parameter, challenges children's meaningful participation in decision-making in any environment.

Especially in Kosovo, the challenge remains the establishment and functioning of Municipal Assemblies of Children in all municipalities of Kosovo, which would contribute to improving the position of young people in local decision-making and the creation of new local leaders.

IV. Impact of COVID-19 on child participation, including online participation, and long-term implications for future child participation

The COVID-19 pandemic has further decreased child development. This pandemic has had a negative impact in the education system in general and specifically in learning. The pandemic has also limited access to essential services, reduced social contact and children's ability to share their views with decision-makers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated the situation of children, which is particularly reflected in children from the most vulnerable groups - children with disabilities, migrant children, Roma children, children in street situation, children with HIV/AIDS, LGBTI children and other children in sensitive situations.

Without systematic solutions, without a strategic approach and sufficient budget allocation for the protection and realization of children's rights, governments in the respective states were unprepared to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable groups of children.

During the COVID-19 period, children were most affected by measures taken by state authorities for protection against the disease, but were never consulted or had any role in decision-making regarding those measures. CWDs were one of the most vulnerable groups affected by COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of online participation, the lack of adequate devices at first; and then the lack of knowledge on using different platforms & devices; lack of assistants made it almost impossible for children with disabilities to participate in school and other activities, where most of them have not attended school at all for certain periods of time thus experiencing a major regress on their academic achievement but also on their socialization with others.

It is the lack of contact with peers and teachers that has further deepened the social isolation of children with disabilities and hindered their participation. The pandemic has had a negative effect on the education system in general, on learning in particular. The pandemic has greatly reduced the space for the development of children. This had a particular impact on the education sector, with an inadequate response to a different model of working with children.

Also, the pandemic has affected the reduction of social contacts and opportunities for children to share their thoughts with decision-makers. Internet access for some children has been impossible and for many of them difficult. This has negatively affected them by restricting their access to online learning. Also, the lack of technological equipment and internet access has made it impossible for children in vulnerable situations and in remote areas to attend classes. This has affected the non-realization of their rights during this period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to respondents, the main recommendations to strengthen processes and platforms for more systematic, meaningful and inclusive child participation in Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and North Macedonia are:

- Create environment where children are empowered to speak out their opinion freely, and feel safe and protected in all settings.
- Promoting the implementation of child focused accountability processes within institutions focused in best interests of the child;
- Lobbying with decision makers to recognize the importance of child participation at all levels.
- Creation of online platforms for children's participation in decision making;
- Strengthen children councils, children's assemblies, and various clubs of children and young people;
- Inform children directly about decision-making processes by the municipality and other institutions using social media;
- Working directly with children and engaging them in public hearings and other practical activities which promote participation and accountability;
- Raise awareness and build the capacity of child rights service providers to participate in decision-making;
- Designate responsible units / officials at national and local level who will communicate with children;
- Develop functional mechanisms for collecting evaluative comments and recommendations of children within educational, health and child protection institutions;
- Develop communication tools for independent institutions and child rights professionals in contact with children;
- Education reforms that aim to increase the capacity in provision of quality inclusive education for different work and life skills, which will lead to a more favorable position for all children in society and thus improve the participation that will be an ongoing process, from childhood to maturity;



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