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## The right to be heard: child participation, a foundation for democratic societies

### Report<sup>1</sup>

Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Rapporteur: Baroness Doreen E. MASSEY, United Kingdom, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

### Summary

Every child has the right to speak and to be heard. Listening to children can help us make our societies a better place for everyone. Child participation is also a building block of the stability of our societies.

While there exists a wealth of examples of successful practice, too often child participation is not given sufficient priority and resources, and remains tokenistic, sporadic, or limited to the privileged and articulate minority.

The Parliamentary Assembly calls on the Council of Europe member States to review the progress achieved; ensure that child participation is systematic and inclusive, with a particular focus on children in vulnerable situations; support capacity building among all professionals dealing with children, as well as among parliamentarians and public service officials; support local and regional authorities and civil society organisations in promoting child participation; and consider lowering the voting age to 16.

To match its words with actions, the Assembly undertakes to consult children – in an appropriate way and with due respect to safeguarding procedures – in the preparation of the reports that concern them, through written consultations, participation in hearings, debates, focus groups and parliamentary networks; and provide children with feedback on what impact they have had.

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1. Reference to Committee: [Doc. 14806](#), Reference 4429 of 1 March 2019.



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## A. Draft resolution<sup>2</sup>

1. Every child has the right to speak and to be heard. Their experiences, thoughts, and feelings must be taken into account when decisions are made about their lives. Children are knowledgeable, resourceful, enthusiastic, daring, and creative. Listening to children can help us make our societies a better place for everyone.
2. While climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the subsequent social crisis are putting children's future at risk, decisions on these issues continue to be made with little or no regard to the children's concerns. With millions of children across the world taking to the streets to claim their right to a future, it is time for governments and parliaments to ensure that children's views are taken into account whenever decisions affecting their lives are made and put into practice.
3. Traditionally, policy makers focus on topics related to childcare and child protection – be it the right to family life, to health, or to education. Child protection is certainly of huge importance, but so is the development of children's capacities to think and act with confidence. Indeed, when done with due care to the age and maturity of the child, such empowerment may enhance levels of protection. In many contexts, children themselves can inform policy makers about their needs, with the help of well-tried child-friendly approaches and methodologies.
4. Truly democratic societies cannot be built unless we listen to children (those people under 18 years of age). Child participation in political decision making strengthens their understanding of democracy and their skills for dialogue, their understanding of their rights, and their capability to resolve conflicts without violence. It enables them to respect themselves and others and increases confidence and self-esteem. It is also an essential building block of democratic security and the stability of our societies.
5. In the past decade, child participation has gained unprecedented levels of attention and has become a must for many organisations. Nevertheless, while there exists a wealth of examples of successful practice, too often child participation is not given sufficient priority and resources, and remains tokenistic, sporadic, or limited to the privileged and articulate minority.
6. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls that child participation is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is therefore an international legal obligation. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges children's right to participation as an essential part of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Child participation is also included in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, the Assembly, and other bodies have adopted texts on child participation, which provide a comprehensive framework and useful guidance, remain valid and need to be better known and used.
7. The Assembly thus calls on the Council of Europe member States and on national parliaments to support effective and sustainable child participation, and to this effect to:
  - 7.1. review the progress achieved, in accordance with the above-mentioned standards and guidance, identify gaps, and take measures to support effective child participation;
  - 7.2. ensure that child participation is systematic and inclusive, with a particular focus on children in vulnerable situations; that it is well prepared and evaluated; that children's views are duly reflected when decisions are made; and that children are provided with feedback on how their views were taken into account;
  - 7.3. support systematic capacity building for promoting child participation among all professionals dealing with children, as well as among parliamentarians and public service officials, through initial and in-service training and education and public awareness campaigns;
  - 7.4. support the development and ensure due respect of relevant safeguarding provisions, with special care for the needs of children in vulnerable situations;
  - 7.5. support local and regional authorities and civil society organisations in promoting child participation;
  - 7.6. consider lowering the voting age to 16;

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2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 1 December 2021.

- 7.7. make full use of Council of Europe tools, such as the Handbook on children's participation "Listen – Act – Change", the Child Participation Assessment Tool, the Reference framework of competences for democratic culture and the "Compasito" manual for human rights education with children;
- 7.8. support international co-operation in the area of child participation, including with other regional and international organisations.
8. The Assembly undertakes to put child participation in practice in its own work as follows:
  - 8.1. consult children, who have diverse backgrounds and thus are representative of our societies, in the preparation of the Assembly reports that concern them, in an appropriate way and with due respect to child safeguarding procedures, for example through written consultations, participation in hearings, focus groups and parliamentary networks; give children a voice in the debate of Assembly reports that concern them, for example by inviting a child representative to take the floor in the debate of the report in plenary or in the Standing Committee, and provide children with feedback on how their contributions were used and what impact they may have had;
  - 8.2. monitor Assembly reports for compliance with the rights of the child and child participation;
  - 8.3. pay particular attention to the participation of children in situations of vulnerability;
  - 8.4. support systematic information sharing and synergies with other Council of Europe bodies, international and European institutions, such as UNICEF, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the European Commission, the Committee of the Regions, the European Parliament, and with the voluntary sector;
  - 8.5. consider facilitating annual reviews of child participation in parliaments, with the support of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD) and with Eurochild.
9. The Assembly welcomes the adoption of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child in 2021, and the preparation [or adoption]<sup>3</sup> of the Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child, as well as the European Commission's European Child Guarantee and expresses its support for the plans for the setup of the EU Children's Participation Platform and of a space for children to become active participants in the European Climate Pact through pledges or by becoming Pact Ambassadors.

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3. The wording is to be amended if the Committee of Ministers adopts the Strategy in January 2022, prior to the adoption of the present draft resolution by the Assembly.

## B. Draft recommendation<sup>4</sup>

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its Resolution ... (2022) "The right to be heard: child participation, a foundation for democratic societies", as well as to its Resolution ... (2022) "Inaction on climate change – a violation of children's rights".
2. The Assembly is convinced that considering children's views on any decisions affecting their lives is an essential pre-condition for building democratic societies. The Council of Europe should further strengthen its support to member States in promoting systematic, effective, and inclusive child participation.
3. The Assembly notes that a solid foundation for promoting child participation is provided by Council of Europe instruments, such as the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities' Recommendation 128 (2003) on the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life; the Assembly Recommendation 1864 (2009) "Promoting the participation by children in decisions affecting them"; the Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 on "Participation of children and young people under the age of 18" and Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7 on the "Council of Europe Charter on education for democratic citizenship and human rights education".
4. The Assembly highlights that the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges children's right to participation as an essential part of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The Council of Europe should make full use of the current impetus and intensify its work on child participation.
5. The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:
  - 5.1. [adopt and<sup>5</sup> support] the effective implementation of the Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2022-2027), as an essential framework for the development, protection, and promotion of the rights of the child;
  - 5.2. continue to promote synergies on the rights of the child and child participation with the institutions of the United Nations and the European Union, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Committee of the Regions, associating the Assembly where appropriate, and assess together what joint action on child participation could be useful;
  - 5.3. give high priority to child participation in the framework of the review of the implementation of the Council of Europe Charter on education for democratic citizenship and human rights education;
  - 5.4. set up an inter-sectorial panel bringing together representatives of relevant committees and monitoring bodies, including from the Assembly, to review, assess, and co-ordinate Council of Europe action on child participation (including child safeguarding), and make recommendations for further development, with a view to mainstreaming meaningful and effective child participation across the Organisation.

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4. Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 1 December 2021.

5. The wording is to be amended if the Committee of Ministers adopts the Strategy in January 2022, prior to the adoption of the present draft recommendation by the Assembly.

## C. Explanatory memorandum by Baroness Doreen E. Massey, rapporteur

### 1. Introduction

1. Children have always participated in many ways within societies – both informally, in families, among friends, and within communities, or more formally – in schools, clubs, team events in sport and in the arts, the voluntary sector, local government, national parliaments, youth parliaments, and through action on specific issues such as climate change. Nevertheless, in the past the dominant attitude was, to a great extent, that “children should be seen and not heard.” We used to assume that adults know what the best interest of the child is and that they act accordingly. Today, there is a growing realisation that this is not always the case, and that decisions made without consulting children can have negative consequences on their well-being and chances for success in life.

2. Considering children’s views and experiences allows us to provide them with better care and protection and it allows them to develop the ability to contribute to their own care and protection. If children are systematically involved when decisions are made about matters that concern them, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and motivation and the ability to contribute to their societies and perform better academically and socially. Such participation benefits not only children, but also adults and institutions encouraging child participation, which helps them to gain different perspectives on issues of concern. UNICEF has children on its boards, other organisations have children on committees or advisory panels. I am aware of many examples of this, and the adults involved testify to the benefits to their work of having children involved and speaking from direct experience. These arguments, in my view, strongly support the lowering of the voting age to 16 across Europe.

3. There have been many debates across Europe and around the world about the issue of having the right to vote at the age of 16. Austria was the first member of the European Union to adopt a voting age of 16 for most purposes in July 2007. A study of young voters’ behaviour following the European Parliament in 2009 showed them to be just as capable as older voters in articulating their beliefs and making decisions. Several countries have now established laws to approve voting at 16. It would seem logical that voting at the age of 16 would lead to a greater awareness of child rights and political systems and would encourage the teaching of civics and rights in schools and other youth settings. I personally support this and will continue to raise this issue in my own Parliament. In Scotland, since 2015, 16-year-olds have been able to vote in national and local elections.

4. Listening to children is not about giving them free rein to do as they like. On the contrary, it enables children to think about their role in society and helps in boosting their ability to express themselves in appropriate ways. I am particularly concerned about the need to involve vulnerable children – those living in poverty, those from minority ethnic or religious backgrounds, those who are disabled, those who are migrants or refugees, those who identify as LGBT. We can learn about needs better from those directly affected. As a young woman said at a PACE seminar “We are experts by experience.” Children can be very articulate about their needs and willing to express them when asked to be involved. The experience of being involved in decision making can profoundly affect the individual’s own development. They become “active agents” rather than passive recipients, which enhances feelings of self-worth and confidence.<sup>6</sup>

5. As a former chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Children, and a former teacher, I am personally and professionally committed to child participation, and happy to see its development. I have had many discussions with my colleagues in the Parliamentary Assembly, as well as with civil society organisations across Europe and internationally, and with many children’s groups and individuals. I am convinced that more could and should be done to support child participation. This led me to propose that the Assembly prepare a report on this topic.<sup>7</sup> Since then, I have had the privilege of discussing opportunities and barriers for child participation in many contexts. These discussions have informed my thinking and ideas. I am indebted to, and would like to thank, all those who have generously given their time to engage with this initiative. The Covid-19 pandemic presented huge challenges for working with teachers, others working with children and children themselves. The initiative, with its original ambitious aims of involving parliamentarians in 12 countries<sup>8</sup> working with facilitators to deliver sessions on child rights and on the functions of the Council of Europe, had to be scaled down dramatically.

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6. Coleman, J. (2021) *The teacher and the teenage brain*. Routledge.

7. In January 2019, the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development tabled a motion for a resolution on “Giving a voice to every child: promoting child participation as a foundation for democratic societies.” The motion was subsequently referred to our Committee for report, and I was appointed rapporteur.

6. However, a great deal was learned, many examples of good practice were found and will be described in this report. I feel confident in saying that now is a good time for the Council of Europe to assess what has been achieved in the area of child participation and how this could be developed. I have seen the potential for parliamentarians to work with children in communities and encourage their engagement with democratic processes. Many colleagues have said, and it is my own experience, that whilst Covid-19 pandemic has devastated local services such as in health and education, many communities, including children, have become more active in stating their needs and pressing for solutions. This report will therefore seek to suggest ways of listening to children and taking on board their concerns and encouraging action, based on what works and what might be possible. Examples of the kind of support measures that are not just about good intentions and “ticking boxes” but genuinely help in making our societies a better place for all children will be described. I hope that these examples will be of use for strengthening child participation in the work of the Assembly, in national parliaments and in other settings where decisions affecting children are made.

## 2. Definitions: what do we mean when we talk about child participation?

7. In the aftermath of World War II, efforts were made to develop international standards on human rights. Promoting the rights of the child, including the right for participation, has been part of this process, even if it was more difficult, and took much longer. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was only adopted in 1989, but it has its roots in the philosophy of Janusz Korczak (1878-1942)<sup>9</sup> who believed that children should be respected and listened to, rather than shaped according to the will of adults. Today, the impetus behind the promotion of child participation comes, on one hand, from the on-going development of the rights of the child, and, on the other hand, from the growing acknowledgement that enabling people to have a say is the best way of developing effective and sustainable solutions.

8. Strategies on Children’s Rights from the Children’s Rights Division of the Council of Europe and from the European Commission and the European Parliament have been forcefully articulated and include specific reference to child participation. Indeed, the Children’s Rights Division developed, in 2020, a handbook on children’s participation, “Listen – Act – Change”.<sup>10</sup>

9. The right of children to be heard on all matters that affect them is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and is one of the four general principles that must be applied in the realisation of all other rights. While Article 12 does not include the term participation, the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s (CRC) deems that the right of children to be listened to together with the rights to information, to freedom of expression, religion, conscience, assembly, and association, amounts to “participation.”<sup>11</sup> The term is widely used to describe children’s right to involvement in decisions that affect them and to have those views considered by decision makers.

10. According to the CRC, the right to be heard applies equally to children as individuals, as well as to children as a group, such as a class of schoolchildren, the children in a neighbourhood or the children of a country. Vulnerable and hard to reach groups have equal rights to participation.<sup>12</sup> For example, in a collaboration called “Reaching In”, Eurochild, the University of Central Lancashire, and partners working with children facing discrimination are collaborating to strengthen opportunities for the participation of marginalised children in public decision making. The pilot work concentrates on European public decision making and local, national, and European policy related to Roma minors’ health. In collaboration with children the “Reaching In” team are collecting and sharing examples of good practice of child participation and influence.<sup>13</sup>

11. Meaningful participation has been conceptualised by Laura Lundy to include the concepts of “Space” where children can come together and can express their views; “Voice” where children are provided with information and support; “Audience” where children have access to the people who take decisions; and “Influence” where children’s views are given proper consideration and they receive feedback on the decisions and how their views were considered. In line with this concept, child participation is defined in Recommendation (2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers to the Council of Europe member States as:

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8. Austria, Azerbaijan, France, Georgia, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, and United Kingdom.

9. Council of Europe (2007), *Children have the right to be heard and adults should listen to their views: Janusz Korczak Lecture dedicated to children participation*, Thomas Hammarberg.

10. <https://rm.coe.int/publication-handbook-on-children-s-participation-eng/1680a14539>.

11. [www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf).

12. [www.eurochild.org/](http://www.eurochild.org/).

13. For further information please see <https://cpip.ucanmakechange2.org/cpip/>.

“individuals and groups of individuals having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, to be heard and to contribute to decision making on matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.”<sup>14</sup>

12. Cath Larkins, building on her work on the Council of Europe’s Handbook on Children’s Participation, has been acting as a consultant to the Sub-Committee on Children in discussions on child participation. She has developed a model for evaluating child participation in the Assembly, which includes nine principles drawn from the UNCRC: an initiative should be transparent and informed; voluntary; respectful; relevant; child-friendly; inclusive, supported by training; safe and sensitive to risk; and accountable. The evaluation model also includes a theory of change that sets out the desirable outcomes by which an initiative can be judged – such as numbers of children involved and their diversity; feelings of safety, support and being informed; better awareness, better services, better communities, better laws or policies; increased scrutiny of laws, policy and services, informed links (for example between Assembly members and children) and institutional learning loops, resourced plans and concrete strategies developed.<sup>15</sup>

13. One parliamentarian said to me recently “I don’t want to just go into a formal Assembly of a hundred kids and talk about me in parliament. It might be a useful starter, but they deserve to be involved in getting to know how parliament really works and how they might have influence”. In other words, whilst raising awareness is important, it is limited, and a Council of Europe strategy for child participation involving parliamentarians could go much further.

14. I was struck by a recent joint study on child participation in EU political and democratic life by Rand Europe and Eurochild, prepared for the European Commission. Eurochild involved members from 10 different countries who in turn organised child focus group consultations. Over 200 children and young people were involved. The study showed that the most prevalent mechanisms of children’s participation are child and youth councils, child and youth parliaments and ombudspersons for children (or an equivalent). Initiatives also take place in schools. Other findings were that most mechanisms are adult initiated and good for proposing ideas but lack evaluation to show their impact. The children involved are usually 12 years old and above. There is a lack of availability and accountability of information. The study showed a lack of recognition of children’s participation and of feedback to children. Facilitative measures to child participation are listed, such as: the EU promoting children’s participation in political and democratic life across all levels; investing in child participation; creating national laws and plans to ensure that children are included in government decisions.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Piloting child participation in the Parliamentary Assembly

15. As the former chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Children I was keen to explore and to introduce child participation in the Assembly. Other colleagues were equally enthusiastic. The first concept of an initiative on child participation in the Assembly was developed after representatives of the Sub-Committee on Children met the (then) President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Liliane Maury Pasquier, to seek support which she gave readily. A report on the benefits of child participation was produced<sup>17</sup> and a survey was conducted among the members of the Sub-Committee.<sup>18</sup> Twelve members of the Sub-Committee expressed interest in participating in this initiative.<sup>19</sup> Meetings were held to determine the rationale for the work and how it might be carried out. At the June 2019 part-session, the Sub-Committee on Children held a working breakfast with representatives of the Children’s Rights Division and the Youth Department, NGOs, children from local schools and the Office of the President of the Assembly, to develop a provisional, organic, and inclusive plan of action. Two experts on children’s rights and child participation were subsequently selected to give advice, and a methodological guide<sup>20</sup> as well as an evaluation model<sup>21</sup> were prepared and shared with

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14. <https://rm.coe.int/168046c478>.

15. For further information please contact Cath Larkins at [info@pencom.eu](mailto:info@pencom.eu).

16. [How can we improve child participation in EU policymaking? A joint study on child participation in EU political and democratic life by Rand Europe and Eurochild](#), contracted by the European Commission.

17. AS/Soc/Child/Inf (2019) 01, Expert memorandum on Promoting child participation in and through the Parliamentary Assembly, prepared by Anne Catherine Crowley, Independent consultant, United Kingdom.

18. AS/Soc/Child/Inf (2019) 04, Summary of replies to the Child participation Survey.

19. From Austria, Azerbaijan, France, Georgia, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Turkey, Ukraine, and United Kingdom.

20. AS/Soc/Inf (2020) 01rev, Proposal for a Methodology on Child Participation in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, prepared by Ms Zsuzsanna Rutai, independent children’s rights consultant.

21. Framework for Evaluating Children’s Participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, prepared by Cath Larkins.

parliamentarians. A theoretical base was developed, and many theoretical models were discussed. This report sets the scene on this and will, I hope, enable the Council of Europe to re-examine practice and build on all our experiences.

16. As stated earlier, original plans have been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools and education centres have been closed or only opened sporadically. Teachers, children, and parents have been under stress and it has been impossible to have face-to-face meetings. This required a re-consideration of what could be achieved in such adverse conditions, and what might be useful for this report. The Sub-Committee on Children has continued to meet online, and updates of progress have been shared. I have attended several webinars and other meetings and listened to children's experiences (particularly regarding the pandemic) and have carried out consultations with individuals and organisations online. The parliamentarians involved with schools and clubs have continued to work, to the best of their ability, to encourage child participation in various ways. Most work has been carried out online. Such meetings have inevitably been less satisfactory than physical face-to-face meetings. At the same time, one advantage of this is that it has been possible to involve more children, nationally and internationally than would otherwise have been achievable.

### **3.1. United Kingdom**

17. In the United Kingdom, we have worked with Burntwood School in London. This is a comprehensive school educating girls from 11 to 18 years, from all backgrounds (multi-ethnic and multifaith). It has been a UNICEF Rights Respecting School (RRS) since 2008 and has gained UNICEF's top award: the gold standard. The school has 100 "Ambassadors" who take responsibility for running school assemblies and visiting primary schools in the area to talk about children's rights. As one facilitator put it, "Primary schools love it. They feel a real connection with the older pupils." Several senior pupils are involved in a circuit of schools who run conferences in conjunction with the UN and there is an active School Council.

18. PACE member Lord Simon Russell of Liverpool contacted the school to explain the Council of Europe initiative. The Headteacher approved and the Deputy Head, Katelyn Farrenson, became the facilitator. She included the Council of Europe initiative in her programme on "Social Responsibility and Democracy" which involves students from age 11 to 17 in discussions on rights and responsibilities in both school and society. A small group and the facilitator have presented the initiative at two sessions. The children were encouraged to find something they were passionate about (for example, mental health, climate change) and discuss what they can do about it, with the help of the parliamentarians. Lord Russell, and I, to a lesser extent, kept in touch with the facilitator on a regular basis. The activities were carried out online, apart from when the school was not in lockdown. He has recently visited the school and spoke with a group of older students. The students have readily incorporated the principles of the Council of Europe materials, which helped to further discussions. The facilitator said that the Council had opened a new perspective to learning and was a beacon of light in the difficulties and stress generated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

19. Lord Russell and I plan to invite a group of students from the school to parliament this autumn to meet with parliamentarians working in an area chosen by the students, as well as attend a parliamentary session. We will also try to get them into a committee meeting of interest to them. The students will be prepared for this by our visiting the school to discuss the programme for such a visit. We plan to visit the school in the coming months.

### **3.2. Ireland**

20. The Irish Senator and PACE member Joe O'Reilly led the initiative to involve *Foróige* in the Assembly's work on child participation. The organisation *Foróige* has branches all over Ireland. It engages over 50,000 young people aged 8 to 24 and 5,500 volunteers. Its vision is "*An Ireland that believes in every young person, that includes you.*" It focuses on uniqueness, creativity, taking responsibility, relations with others, making a difference in the world, having an influence, and learning from every situation. The Ombudsperson for Ireland is supportive and involved. The work includes a "Big Sister, Big Brother" mentoring programme and other programmes on "Youth Citizens", "Youth Leaders up" and "Youth Entrepreneurship". It has its own Charter of Rights. It produces a wide range of publications, including posters. *Foróige* works with other organisations, such as the Irish Youth Justice Service and programmes on sexual health. Children are involved in developing aims and objectives for every programme and evaluating them.

21. Senator O'Reilly has kept in touch with *Foróige* and involved them in two presentations at Council of Europe events, on children's rights, the right to safety online and climate change. The methods of working on children's rights and increasing knowledge of democracy in societies are fully described in their report to the

Assembly<sup>22</sup> and follow the materials produced by the Assembly. Over 130 young people aged 15 to 18 were involved. Senator O'Reilly described his role in the Council of Europe and what it stands for. Some participants had heard of the Council of Europe but were initially uncertain about the roles of the different European organisations. After the discussion they noted that the most important function of this organisation was that of upholding the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, and ensuring that countries do not see war as a solution to conflicts and disagreements.

22. The group researched and discussed the rights of young people, using Council of Europe materials as well as other similar ones. A poll was taken on 9 topics, one of which would be presented to Senator O'Reilly. The topic chosen was the right to protection while using the internet. The group expressed their wish that the Assembly streamline this topic across all 47 member States as a priority and engage with schools and youth groups in the consultation process.<sup>23</sup> The group also discussed my colleague Ms Jennifer De Temmerman's report on climate change and prepared their own presentation with their concerns and recommendations on what governments could do. This was presented to the Social Affairs Committee in December 2020 and in June 2021 and reflected the children's frustration about climate change and the lack of dialogue between generations. They discussed the Sustainable Development Goals and concluded that their generation would have an enormous influence on future change.

23. The young people who took part in these discussions expressed their appreciation of "an opportunity to engage in a consultation process directly with PACE." They also noted that presenting to a parliamentarian felt like they were making a difference or starting the process of change and that it was very important for young people to have opportunities to engage and be heard.

24. Three members of the group and their facilitator will produce, with the help of consultants Cath Larkins and Zsuzsanna Rutai, a child-friendly version of this report.

### 3.3. France

25. In France, our colleagues Ms Martine Wonner and Ms Jennifer De Temmerman worked with several groups of children. Romaines Primary School from Strasbourg Koenigshoffen took part in classroom discussions, held meetings with Ms Wonner, attended Assembly hearings and prepared a written report on their activities. A lot of work was done in school time, thanks to a committed teacher, and supportive school administration, who see this initiative as a good learning opportunity for the children and their school. Association Themis advised the school in these endeavours and facilitated contacts and exchanges. Founded in 1990, Themis is an association that aims to improve legal access for children and young people. It provides legal information and personalised support; facilitates and supports citizenship and human rights education; and promotes child participation at national and European levels.<sup>24</sup> As part of its outreach activities, Themis has organised several editions of a Children's Forum in the Council of Europe's Hemicycle in Strasbourg. To support the children of the Romans school in expressing themselves and participating in the work of the sub-committee, the association also carried out interventions in class, with appropriate support materials.

26. Ms De Temmerman worked with Eco-delegates from Joan of Arc High School, Colombes, who presented their work at Assembly hearings. They suggested that democracy must be developed in schools around projects devoted to sustainable development. In their school, each class has at least one eco-delegate who leads actions within the school and participates in the class council. The eco-delegates meet every three weeks with the co-ordinating teacher to discuss the actions chosen. It is possible to invite parliamentarians to these debates. Each year, students focus on a different theme, such as energy, water, or biodiversity. A steering committee with parents and teachers was set up to develop a strategy on how specific goals on these themes could be achieved in their school. Some mayors participate in these committees. This year, eco-delegates started using social media to share their work with their classmates.

27. Working contacts have also been established with members of the youth council of the City of Strasbourg. I had the pleasure of meeting them online and discussing their work, as well as the challenges that they are facing in the context of pandemic. They took part in a hearing and provided written contributions to this report (as well as on the report "Inaction on climate change - a violation of children's rights"<sup>25</sup>), including the following proposals: allow young people to sit in the Assembly; organise events where young

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22. Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe Youth Consultation Programme – Written contribution by Foróige National Youth Organisation, AS/Soc/Inf (2021) 04.

23. Consequently, following Mr O'Reilly's initiative, the draft motion on "The children's right to protection while using the internet" was adopted by the Committee on Social Affairs on 9 September 2021 and tabled on behalf of the Committee.

24. <https://www.themis.asso.fr/>.

25. Doc. 15436.

people can express themselves publicly; develop frameworks that allow for dialogue between young people and elected officials (for example, participation spaces, meetings, debates, sessions, forums, digital platforms, surveys). While some of these proposals require additional funding and resources, and might not be feasible, at least in the short term, some others can certainly be integrated in the work of the Assembly, in a step-by-step way, and on a small scale. The youth counsellors did most of this work in their free time. At middle and high school, they were excused from courses on the occasion of the PACE hearing.

28. The young people of the city of Strasbourg have notably pointed out, in a very relevant way, that the social climate is deteriorating more and more noticeably, generating an increased need for protection and security for young people. European texts (European Convention on Human Rights, European Social Charter) and international texts (Convention on the Rights of the Child) guarantee children and young people social rights which should protect them from the violence and the harmful situations mentioned above. However, it is essential to consolidate their right to protection and strengthen its application to guarantee them a more peaceful social life and allow them to live fulfilling and enriching collective experiences. *“Non aux violences éducatives ordinaires! Place aux droits des jeunes!”* [“No to ordinary educational violence! Make way for youth rights!”] is a poster campaign that warns about the place of and respect for the rights of young people and denounces the serious situations of which some young people are the victims. This project was presented to the Mayor of Strasbourg and to elected municipal officials in 2020.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.4. Hearings

29. As part of the above-mentioned activities, children from Azerbaijan, France, Ireland, and United Kingdom attended face-to-face and online public hearings organised by the Social Affairs Committee from November 2019 to November 2021. They made presentations and took part in the discussions. They expressed their feelings, shared their research, and made practical recommendations. Children from 10- to 18-years-old took part in these meetings and were accompanied by their teachers or NGO leaders. This has been a very enriching experience both for the children and the parliamentarians.

30. The children involved considered that children knew best what their needs were, they should be involved in every discussion affecting them. The children felt that participation had a substantial impact on their psychological development and positive implications on self-control, responsibility, communication skills and the ability to perceive others' point of view, as well as expressing one's own opinions. Being able to discuss their problems and to ask for help allowed children to lower stress levels and to build better foundations for their future. The negative effects of not participating included high levels of uncertainty and anxiety. The main reasons for children not participating included: lack of experience and the lack of opportunities for expressing their feelings, opinions and wishes. Adults could help children prepare from an early age to make decisions by and for themselves, by giving them freedom and options to make choices, while ensuring the necessary control and providing support. Adults could also advise children on the possible consequences of their decisions, and arrange children's participation at different levels, in accordance with their age and maturity.

31. The children considered that it was a great idea to involve children in the work of parliaments. They put forward many practical suggestions and ideas, including the creation of an online platform and debates through which many children from many countries can speak; direct communication between children and parliamentarians who visit them in their schools and organisations and *quartiers* (not just going through school councils); inviting elected children from every country to come and contribute to a debate in Strasbourg; children visiting their national parliaments and raising the issues that children think are important; organising a Youth Day; organising opinion polls and surveys; traineeships for children; and starting from a blank page and using creative activities. Among the subjects of special interest, the children mentioned the functioning of schools, neighbourhood facilities, judicial proceedings, mental health, discrimination, climate change and the rights of the child. They felt that children should be able to choose their own representatives; the language used in the consultations needed to be simpler and more understandable; and it was important to define how we knew what worked. Combinations of different means of participation were needed, and a step-by-step approach should be applied.

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26. AS/Soc/Inf (2021) 02, “Contribution du Conseil des jeunes de la Ville de Strasbourg aux travaux de l'Assemblée Parlementaire du Conseil de l'Europe” [“Written contribution from the Youth Council of the City of Strasbourg to the work of the Assembly”, in French only].

32. The teachers and NGOs representatives who have accompanied the children during these hearings, have stressed the importance of including child participation in school programmes, initial and in-service teacher training, and promotion of a whole school approach and partnerships, so that all actors within the school and those outside of it (e.g., parents, local authorities and civil society organisations) value and support such participation.

### **3.5. Next steps**

33. As mentioned earlier, a child-friendly version of the report is being prepared, in close co-operation with the children from Ireland, and in consultation with other children. It is proposed to disseminate a provisional version of this document on the occasion of the adoption of the report in January 2022, and to finalise it after the adoption. The aim is to share the information on the report and its recommendations with a broad audience, and in particular children and professionals working with them. It is hoped that it will be a good example of how parliaments can work with children, that can be replicated in national parliaments and elsewhere as appropriate

34. Achieving child participation requires effort but it is exciting and fulfilling. Such participation can be integrated within the existing school and NGO programmes and activities. It can be very basic or very ambitious, depending on the available resources. It requires political support and individual commitment. My suggestion would be to enshrine in the Assembly's Rules of Procedure an obligation to consult children on all the reports that deal with issues that can affect children's lives (and not necessarily only those that deal specifically with children's rights), to propose several simple models, and to provide practical and easy-to-use tools for such participation. There is already a great deal of expertise and experience available on this subject, and the support materials developed as part of the preparation of this report could be a good starting point.

35. The Parliamentary Assembly could usefully hold a debate on lowering the voting age. Many colleagues have experience of being involved in such debates in their own countries and it would be useful to share such experience and its impact.

## **4. Overview of existing practices**

36. In this section, I will consider some other existing practices, which illustrate what can be done to encourage children to learn about democratic principles and human rights; to help them gain participation skills, and to involve them effectively in decision-making processes. The contexts include parliaments, schools, youth organisations, international organisations, local government, and the voluntary sector (NGOs). I recognise that there will be many more examples of good practice experienced by colleagues, and hopefully these will be useful in future deliberations on how the Council of Europe, this Assembly, and national parliaments might move forward with a strategy for child participation as a foundation for democratic societies.

### **4.1. The Council of Europe**

37. The Council of Europe, which was set up to protect and promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in its 47 member States, considers child participation of crucial importance for achieving its objectives. Its Strategy for the Rights of the Child is developed by the Children's Rights Division. It promotes child participation both as a key strategic objective and as a cross-cutting approach that is mainstreamed into the Organisation's standard-setting, monitoring, and co-operation activities. To support such participation, a Council of Europe Safeguarding Policy is currently under preparation. It will cover a broad range of issues, from data protection and consent arrangements to ensuring that no child labour is involved when running procurement procedures. The Children's Rights Division is currently updating the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child and involving a wide number of contributors, including children, NGOs, and parliamentarians. The new Strategy is to be launched in Rome on 7-8 April 2022 under the Italian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

38. The Council of Europe aims to support its member States in strengthening democracy and human rights by facilitating the development of common basic standards that the governments agree upon ("standard-setting"), putting in place procedures for checking if these standards are respected ("monitoring"), and helping the countries to work together on bridging the gaps ("co-operation"). The main contributors to this work in the area of children's rights are the Children's Rights Division and Youth and Education Departments, but virtually all other parts of the Organisation are involved.

#### 4.1.1. *Standard setting: agreeing on common rules*

39. In 2012, the member States adopted the Recommendation on participation of children and young people under the age of 18,<sup>27</sup> which provides practical guidelines on the rights of children and young people to be heard in all settings. Also in 2012, the member States adopted the Recommendation on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, thus undertaking to promote democratic governance in all educational institutions “both as a desirable and beneficial method of governance in its own right and as a practical means of learning and experiencing democracy and respect for human rights.” These recommendations express the political consensus on child participation and provide a useful basis for the development of national legislation. They also underpin co-operation activities that bring together government officials, professionals, and civil society representatives from the 47 member States.

40. In the youth sector, back in 1995, the Council of Europe introduced a ground-breaking co-management system. Within this system both representatives of public authorities responsible for youth issues and young Europeans have an equal say, and exchange ideas and experiences. Through this co-operation, mutual understanding and respect are developed and the legitimacy of the decisions made is reinforced, enabling their effective implementation.<sup>28</sup> One of the main aims of this system is to bring the youth perspective to the Council of Europe’s work, and its deliberations often lead to the adoption of resolutions, recommendations and treaties, such as the “Revised European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life”.<sup>29</sup> A motion for an Assembly resolution on the establishment of a youth partner status with the Assembly was recently tabled.<sup>30</sup> The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities operates a youth delegates scheme, whereby one youth delegate per member state is selected following an open call and they take part in the Congress sessions for one year, undertaking projects and advising the Congress on various issues.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4.1.2. *Monitoring and evaluation: assessing progress*

41. Efforts have been made to include children in monitoring activities, which aim to assess to what extent the countries uphold the commitments voluntarily undertaken under various treaties. The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (CETS No. 201, Lanzarote Convention), requires criminalisation of sexual offences against children. The countries that have ratified the Convention (“Parties to the Convention”) undertake to prevent sexual violence, to protect child victims and to prosecute offenders. The Committee of the Parties to the Convention (Lanzarote Committee) monitors whether the Parties effectively implement the Convention. It seeks the views of civil society and requires Parties to “encourage the participation of children, according to their evolving capacity, in the development and the implementation of State policies, programmes or other initiatives” (Article 9 (1)). Guidelines for the Implementation of Child Participation have been developed to support the 2<sup>nd</sup> thematic monitoring round on “The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs).”

42. The role of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights is to foster the effective observance of human rights, identify possible shortcomings in the law and practice, and assist member states in the implementation of human rights standards. Commissioner Dunja Mijatović gives high priority to child participation and has recently pointed out that few governments “have made systematic efforts to institutionalise mechanisms at different levels for children to participate actively and meaningfully in all decisions that affect them. In many countries children still face challenges in accessing information about their rights and national policies that affect them.”<sup>32</sup>

43. Children play an active role in high profile evaluation events, such as the Conference entitled “Redefining Power: Strengthening the rights of the child as the key to a future-proof Europe”, which was organised in 2019 to review mid-term progress in the implementation of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the “Learning to Live Together” Conference, held in 2017, aimed at reviewing the implementation of the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education.

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27. Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18.

28. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/co-management](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/co-management).

29. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/adopted-texts-and-recommendations](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/adopted-texts-and-recommendations).

30. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/co-operation-between-the-parliamentary-assembly-and-the-advisory-council-on-youth-intensifies](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/co-operation-between-the-parliamentary-assembly-and-the-advisory-council-on-youth-intensifies).

31. [www.coe.int/en/web/congress/youth-delegates](http://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/youth-delegates).

32. [www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/boosting-child-and-youth-participation-from-voice-to-choice?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Fen%2Fweb%2Fcommissioner](http://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/boosting-child-and-youth-participation-from-voice-to-choice?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Fen%2Fweb%2Fcommissioner).

33. [www.coe.int/en/web/children/strengthening-the-rights-of-the-child-as-the-key-to-a-future-proof-europe](http://www.coe.int/en/web/children/strengthening-the-rights-of-the-child-as-the-key-to-a-future-proof-europe).

44. The Child Participation Assessment Tool provides indicators to measure progress in implementing the Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18. The Tool is accompanied by an Implementation Guide with a roadmap and detailed guidance on information collection and focus groups, based on the results of reporting to the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child. It was tested in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, and Romania.

#### *4.1.3. Co-operation: working together to improve the situation*

45. In April 2021, the Council of Europe and its partners from the Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Portugal and Slovenia, launched the EU-CoE Joint Project “CP4EUROPE – Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe” which they will implement until 31 March 2023. The expected results include child participation assessments and improved national frameworks, as well as the creation of a “Child participation leadership network”, and a new webpage to facilitate the sharing of resources and experiences.

46. For child participation to be successful, adults working with children need to be duly prepared and trained. The Council of Europe develops practical materials based on existing practice and lessons learned. Among the latest examples is the publication of “New and innovative forms of youth participation in decision-making processes”<sup>34</sup> and the Handbook on children’s participation “Listen – Act – Change”, both for professionals working with children.<sup>35</sup> The HELP Online course on “Child-friendly Justice and Children’s Rights” supports child participation within the justice system.<sup>36</sup>

47. The “4Children-by-Children” campaign and associated learning material are part of the DOSTAI initiative to assist children in confronting prejudice and challenging stereotypes about Roma. Seventy children aged 12–15 from Albania, Hungary and Spain took part in specially designed “think tank” activities through a child consultation process and helped in developing child-friendly material.

48. Child participation is also promoted through the Europe Prize, which was set up in 1955 by the Assembly to reward towns which champion European ideals, for example, by means of twinning of towns, European events, or exchanges between educational establishments. Towns must apply first for the European Diploma, then for the Flag of Honour and the Plaque of Honour. The Europe Prize Sub-Committee, of which I am a member, adjudicates on each category annually. In 2021, a new Europe Prize trophy replaced the original trophy. It was designed by a team of young graphic artists from the Strate School of Design in France. The city of Khmelnytski, in Ukraine, was the winner of the Europe Prize trophy in 2021. I am always delighted to see, when we examine the entries for awards, the emphasis which is placed on involving children and young people. This year, for example, I visited (virtually) the town of Meudon (near Paris) to present the Plaque of Honour. Meudon is outstanding in involving young people in the life of the town. It runs Europe Clubs to raise awareness about European issues among young people, organises visits to the European institutions for young people from the city’s youth sites and for young, elected officials of the Municipal Youth Council, and involves children in World War II commemorations. Apart from this formal competition, many parliamentarians will be aware of the numerous activities in their local towns where children are involved in community service, and where local councillors encourage child participation.

#### **4.2. Other international institutions**

49. The European Union has expressed a clear commitment to child participation, including in the Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 24), the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child. As previously mentioned, in 2021, the European Commission published a “Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life.”<sup>37</sup> The study covers a broad range of mechanisms that have been implemented since 2012 across 28 countries. During this research, over 200 children and young people

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34. <https://rm.coe.int/new-and-innovative-forms-of-youth-participation-in-decision-making-pro/1680759e6a>.

35. Many other publications are available on-line in many languages. The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) is a set of materials that can be used by education systems “to equip young people with the competences that are needed to [...] to participate effectively in a culture of democracy, and to live peacefully together with others in culturally diverse societies”. “Living with controversy – a toolkit for handling controversy in schools” aims to assist educators in helping children to develop skills for respectful dialogue on difficult issues. “Democratic governance of schools” is a manual for school heads, which aims to promote participation of children, but also of their parents and the broader community in the life of the school. Compass and Compasito include training modules on human rights with young people and children. Policy reviews on child and youth participation provide a comprehensive analysis of the compliance of national legislation, policies, and practice with a child’s right to participation.

36. <https://rm.coe.int/help-course-brief-child-friendly-justice/16808b4f27>.

37. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child\\_participation\\_final\\_raport\\_revised\\_28.04.2021\\_final\\_web\\_pdf.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child_participation_final_raport_revised_28.04.2021_final_web_pdf.pdf).

shared their experiences. Thanks to leading child rights organisations, the Commission received over 10,000 online submissions from children on the new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The Commission is also publishing child-friendly versions of the report and of the Strategy. The European Forum on the Rights of the Child is an annual conference, which gathers key actors, international organisations, NGOs, Ombudspersons for children, practitioners, academics, and EU institutions to promote good practice.

50. In the European Parliament, *Parliamentariums* in Brussels and Strasbourg offer a role-play game for young people. They are installed in a dedicated space as part of a permanent exhibition. The role-play game accommodates 16 to 32 players aged 14 and above. It lasts for about 2.5 hours and must be pre-booked around 4 months in advance. The young people are given the roles of MEPs of four political groups discussing two fictitious cases, the aim being to simulate the legislative process. The process is fully automated, and the students use mobile phones to guide them through the game.<sup>38</sup>

51. Established in 1987, the European Youth Parliament (EYP) is a peer-to-peer educational programme operating in 40 countries across Europe. Its mission is “to inspire and empower young Europeans to become open-minded, tolerant, and active citizens.” It operates through a network of organisations of National Committees across Europe and provides a forum for young people to express opinions on a wide range of topics. Most participants are aged 16–25 years. Overall, more than 500 EYP events are organised each year at local, national, and international levels and more than 30 000 young people take part in those activities.

52. Children contribute to reporting procedures in the framework of several UN mechanisms, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Periodic Review and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has integrated child participation in its work in many other ways. Children participate in the design, planning, and organisation of the General Discussion Days.<sup>39</sup> The Committee consults with children during the drafting process of its general comments. The Committee engages children in various events, including anniversaries of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### **4.3. Parliaments: experiencing democracy**

53. Many parliaments across the world are engaged in initiatives and programmes involving children. The publication of “Parliaments promoting Democracy”<sup>40</sup> showcases how some 50 countries around the world are promoting democracy, particularly among young people. It follows a survey conducted by the Austrian Parliament in the lead-up to the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in August 2020, which it co-hosted virtually with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations. A Handbook on Child Participation in Parliament published in 2014 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UNICEF aims “to provide parliamentarians with information on a variety of mechanisms designed to ensure that children’s participation in parliaments is meaningful, reflects the voices of the most marginalised, and contributes to policies, laws, and budgets that intend to correct the disparities and inequities that afflict the world’s children.”<sup>41</sup> A review of national children and youth parliaments is included in the recently published “Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life.”<sup>42</sup> In what follows, I can only give a snapshot of various approaches, but more information is available on websites or by contacting the programmes concerned.

#### **4.3.1. Outreach activities: examples of learning about rights and democracy**

54. In the United Kingdom the Parliament runs an Engagement Programme and has an Education Department.<sup>43</sup> Visits to Parliament are organised for the public and resources such as booklets, videos, and posters are sent out on request. There are specific resources for children of different ages. Workshops for schools are run by Education Centre staff using participatory methods, including group discussion, role play and games, depending on age, to help children understand how government works and what children can do to have influence. Outreach work involves MPs and Peers visiting schools or other youth settings to present what parliament does and their role in it. MPs also have links with local government structures and can introduce children to this aspect of democracy. Under the Programme “Learning with the Lords”<sup>44</sup>, Peers visit

38. <https://visiting.europarl.europa.eu/en/visitor-offer/brussels/parlamentarium> and <https://visiting.europarl.europa.eu/en/visitor-offer/strasbourg/parlamentarium-simone-veil>.

39. [www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crc/pages/discussiondays.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crc/pages/discussiondays.aspx).

40. [www.ipu.org/es/node/10761](http://www.ipu.org/es/node/10761).

41. <http://archive.ipu.org/PDF/publications/child-parl-e.pdf>.

42. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child\\_participation\\_final\\_raport\\_revised\\_28.04.2021\\_final\\_web\\_pdf.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child_participation_final_raport_revised_28.04.2021_final_web_pdf.pdf).

43. <https://learning.parliament.uk/en/>.

44. <https://learning.parliament.uk/en/session-workshop/learn-with-the-lords-online/>.

schools and invite schools to parliament. Recently, the Lord Speaker has asked me to set up a small group of Peers, children and advisers involved in this programme to explore, and report back to him on which structures across Parliament work with children and young people and in what manner specifically. Recommendations for development will be included. We hope to report back by next March.

55. The Austrian Parliament has an educational programme,<sup>45</sup> which includes a Democracy Workshop,<sup>46</sup> consisting of workshops for students in grades 3 to 9. These participatory workshops introduce the foundations of democracy and parliamentary life, including the role of European institutions. I had the pleasure, when in Austria for an Assembly meeting, of attending one of these workshops and was invited to a discussion after the event. The students were curious and informed about Europe and asked and responded to questions with confidence. The Parliament also runs a Youth Parliament and Apprentices Forum. In the Youth Parliament, participants have discussion groups, argue their positions, and vote on topical issues. Its proceedings are videorecorded, and a newspaper covers these activities. In the Apprentices Forum, participants learn about democracy and what it means to each of them, the role of parliament and how people can influence the democratic process. The Civics Education Department runs these workshops and liaises with the Ministry of Education in relation to school involvement.

56. Every other year, Denmark holds three-week long “School Elections”, in which 13- to 16-year-olds simulate the entire process of a real parliamentary election – from the announcement of the election through to broadcasting of the polling results on TV. The programme is designed to strengthen pupils’ confidence in taking part in the political process and broaden their understanding of how elections work. The result of the elections attracts considerable interest in the Danish press.

57. The “Democracy Game” is an all-day role-play programme for secondary school students in Hungary. It demonstrates the legislative process through the example of a fictitious bill. Four school groups participate at once, representing different parties with different values. These profiles accompanied by the fictitious bill are sent to the students several weeks before the event. During the preparation period they can draft amendments and familiarise themselves with the other parties’ proposed amendments. On the day, the participants attend plenary sittings, committee meetings and parliamentary group meetings, culminating in the final vote. At the end of the day, they hold a press conference. The special feature of the programme is that the coalition does not have a majority in Parliament, so all the party groups must co-operate if they want to succeed.

#### *4.3.2. Participating in democracy: consultation leading to change*

58. Ultimately, the aim of child participation is to ensure that children’s views are considered when decisions affecting their lives are made, including in parliaments. One example of how this can be done is the project on “Supporting implementation of *Barnhaus* (Children’s house) in Slovenia”, which was organised by the Council of Europe Children’s Rights Division in 2019-2021 to support victims and witnesses of sexual violence against children. In 2020, the Ministry of Justice held a public consultation on the draft law in which 104 children participated. These consultations were carried out in line with the Council of Europe and other international standards. Following this consultation, in 2021 the National Assembly of Slovenia adopted the Law on Child Protection (“Barnhaus Law”). The children evaluated the process positively. They appreciated that their opinions were valued and expressed interest in taking part in similar activities in the future.

59. Some parliaments, such as those of Germany and Turkey, have established children’s rights committees that examine all laws, policies, and the government budget from a child rights perspective. Such committees can not only invite children to participate in their proceedings and provide testimony but also set up mechanisms for ongoing participation.

60. In the United Kingdom, the All Party Parliamentary Groups (which include members from all Parties in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords) often invite experts on a particular topic to address the group in order to add to their knowledge. Several groups are concerned with different aspects of children’s rights and welfare. Ministers frequently speak at these groups. Children also speak and attend meetings where their interests are involved. Such involvement of children can impact on the views of ministers and members of groups. Frequently children are asked to follow-up meetings for further consultation. The select Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights seeks the views of children as relevant.

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45. [www.demokratiewebstatt.at/](http://www.demokratiewebstatt.at/).

46. [www.demokratiewebstatt.at/fileadmin/360-dws-virtual/](http://www.demokratiewebstatt.at/fileadmin/360-dws-virtual/).

#### 4.4. The voluntary sector

61. The voluntary sector and its NGOs are of unique importance in supporting children. There are many international organisations defending children's rights (such as *Save the Children*, *Child Rights International Network* (CRIN), *Defence for Children International* (DCI) and *Child Rights Connect*), and every country has its own NGOs specialising in children's issues and collaborating where appropriate (online safety, for example). The Centre for Human Rights in Geneva has a children's rights section with whom the Council of Europe has worked specifically on the issue of safeguarding children and young people in sports. NGOs have grass roots information about children in all contexts and can inform parliamentarians directly, via briefings and meetings. In the United Kingdom, they provide enormous support to All Party Parliamentary Groups for children and other issues. All NGOs I know of have children on their governing bodies or create separate advisory panels, as does the Children's Commissioner. Some provide services, such as professional training. *Save the Children* has developed a "Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children's participation."<sup>47</sup> The toolkit provides a conceptual framework, guidance on how to undertake monitoring and evaluation and practical tools, for the organisations working directly with children, child- and youth-led organisations, and for governments that are committed to fulfilling their obligations to respect children's right to participate.

62. Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals who work with and for children in Europe and has a membership across Europe. They are committed to child participation. Eurochild works closely with the European Union and the Council of Europe. It has a Children's Council, National Eurochild Forums and a Child Participation Reference Group. They have produced a resource developed with children and for children which explains the EC Recommendation on Investing in Children. They hold webinars and support participation of children in relevant fora such as the high-profile event held by the European Parliament in Brussels for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UNCRC.<sup>48</sup> They produce policy briefings, working papers and reports on issues which affect the lives of children. Membership is open to all organisations and individuals with an interest in the rights and wellbeing of children and young people.

#### 4.5. Schools and the youth sector

63. Many schools are actively promoting child participation. One example of such work is the Rights Respecting Schools Programme (RSS) run by UNICEF UK. Other national committees of UNICEF are also actively engaged, including Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, and France. More than 5,000 schools across the United Kingdom are currently involved with 1.7 million children and young people. This includes primary and secondary schools, schools for children with special needs and pupil referral units (for disaffected students). The focus is "to work with schools to create safe and inspiring places to learn, where children's rights are respected, their talents are nurtured, and they are able to thrive." There are four key areas of impact for children: wellbeing, participation, relationships, and self-esteem. The premise is that children who understand their rights understand how they and others should be treated and their sense of self-worth is strengthened.

64. An extensive website supports the programme, including guidance and case studies. There is a training programme for teachers who then share their learning with colleagues. The Head of the RSS UK, Frances Bentley, has said in an interview that schools must have ownership of the programme. They do not use only UNICEF materials but invent their own and adapt. It is important to have the headteacher and senior staff supportive for RSS to become a whole school approach to empower staff and pupils. The programme links to other initiatives in school from government, local authorities, and the voluntary sector. A school can apply for an RRS award, beginning with bronze and going on to silver and gold. Some students from the school who have gone on to higher education have set up their own version of RRS. The programme works in settings outside schools, for example in madrassas (religious schools, which are attached to mosques). The Deputy Headteacher who leads the programme in Burntwood also works with an LGBT group outside the school.

65. The programme has been extensively evaluated for its impact on students, teachers, and entire schools. Between 2017 and 2019, UNICEF gathered evidence from 190 000 students and 20 000 staff. This survey found that children know about rights, can exercise their rights, feel valued and recognise the rights of others. School headteachers and staff were overwhelmingly positive about the programme.<sup>49</sup> In 2020, the Equality and Human Rights Commissions published a research report on 10 RRS schools. The report showed the impact on attainment, attendance, and a reduction in racist and other prejudiced attitudes.<sup>50</sup>

47. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document-collections/toolkit-monitoring-and-evaluating-childrens-participation>.

48. <https://www.eurochild.org/event/celebrating-30-years-of-the-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child/>.

49. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rssa/impact-of-rssa/>.

66. I can testify personally to the success of the RRS. Some years ago, I was a School Governor of a primary school in South London. It was a challenging school with several homeless families and a high incidence of free school meals (an indication of poverty). Its students used over 40 different languages at home and many children entered with no English. Academic and behavioural standards were low. It was classed by inspectors as a “special needs” school. The governors appointed a new headteacher who had worked in Rights Respecting Schools. She immediately brought in the programme. Staff were trained, the school appearance was changed with paintings and other work of pupils displayed around the premises, each class developed its own set of class rules, a School Council was set up. A room for parents was included. A school garden was built. School pets lived in classrooms in the school and children were responsible for their care. New ways of teaching were brought in. Absenteeism was reduced and behaviour improved, academic attainment rose, and more parents were involved and supportive. Within 2 years, the school was judged, by inspectors, to be excellent.

#### **4.6. Local authorities**

67. In Turkey, at the local level and in several municipalities, there are “Children’s Councils – Children’s Municipalities”, and several are in the process of being established. The rules of election/selection differ across municipalities, as do their activities and effective participation in local decision-making processes. These councils are either under the umbrella of City Councils or Local Governments. Most of these councils hold meetings and take decisions internally; with only a very few of them having any institutionally binding/effective relationship with the governing authorities and local decision-making processes. The İzmir Metropolitan Municipality is in the process of institutionalising this effort, with the aim of creating examples of true democratic participation of children. In smaller municipalities – such as Kadıköy Municipality in İstanbul, and Şavşat Municipality in Artvin – interaction between the children’s council and the municipality is often directly related to decision-making process.

### **5. Conclusions**

68. The Council of Europe with its relevant Divisions and Committees has produced a great deal of excellent work on child welfare, child protection and child empowerment. There are many highly committed and knowledgeable people amongst staff and parliamentarians. I feel that we could benefit from a “drawing together” of initiatives in order to have a picture of what we do in relation to child participation, how this has been received and how we might proceed in developing what has been achieved. I would suggest that a panel be convened consisting of parliamentarians, a member of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF), a member of the Lanzarote Committee, a representative from the Children’s Rights Division, the Youth and Education Departments, Eurochild, an agreed number of children, and an independent expert on child participation. Its remit would be to draw together information (in particular, examples of how children have influenced laws and policies) and to suggest next moves. I would suggest that the panel be chaired by either the President of the Assembly or its Secretary General.

69. During work on my last report on the “Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children’s rights”,<sup>51</sup> I was impressed by the wish from representatives of the European Commission and of the European Parliament to collaborate on relevant issues. In October 2021 I had another opportunity to discuss the issue of child participation with Ms Ewa Kopacz, European Parliament Co-ordinator on Children’s Rights. Useful exchanges were also held with Mr Colin Scicluna, Head of Cabinet of European Commissioner Dubravka Šuica, and Mr Emilio Puccio, Co-ordinator of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children’s Rights. Furthermore, at a high-level international conference on 21 October this year,<sup>52</sup> experts, including children, spoke of their experiences of child participation. I was pleased to be invited to chair a discussion with three children from Portugal and Slovenia. Children were heavily involved in sessions. Valeria Setti, European Commission Co-ordinator for the rights of the child, restated the Commission’s commitment to developing and supporting child participation in Europe with a number of initiatives in progress and planned. The current mobilisation of the EU institutions for promoting participation in general, and child participation is commendable. I am convinced that joining forces on child participation could be productive and effective. How that might work would, of course, be up to the three organisations to decide.

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50. Culhane L. and McGeough E. (2020), [Respect, Equality, Participation: Exploring Humans Rights Education](#).

51. Doc. 15311.

52. High-level conference on “Progress towards meaningful child participation in decision making – a multi-stakeholder dialogue”, organised in the framework of the European Union and Council of Europe joint project “CP4Europe – Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe”, implemented in partnership with 5 countries – the Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Portugal, and Slovenia.

70. This report maintains, as do those with whom I have worked in its development, that the opinions and perceptions of children should be considered in all settings, including when forming, and assessing policy in democratic institutions. Child participation should be part of policy development and implementation in areas such as health, education, migration, family, and community affairs. Children have repeatedly shown themselves to be able to participate in decision making. As one 9-year-old said, “we children are more acceptable and reliable than society gives us credit for. Give us the opportunity to participate.”<sup>53</sup>

71. The pandemic has been a difficult time for us all, and children have suffered disproportionately. At the same time, it may have enabled stock taking for individuals and groups about who they are, what they want to achieve, how they might help others, as well as the benefits and dangers of online engagement. Many local communities have sprung to life during the strictures of Covid-19. Re-thinking our possibilities for involving children in democratic societies could be refreshing and practical. I feel that now is a good time for us to assess what has been achieved and what we could further achieve.

72. While the principle of child participation has been widely acknowledged, too often it becomes tokenism and consequently fails to make a real difference in children’s lives. The main conclusion that emerged from my discussions with different partners is that child participation must be meaningful and sustainable. For this, it needs to be thoroughly prepared, supported with sufficient resources, and integrated with existing structures and working methods.

73. One key area that many of my interlocutors emphasised is capacity building for child participation. It is important to include child participation in curricula for education and training for all professionals dealing with children, as well as to envisage training for parliamentarians and public servants. European organisations could perhaps agree on a training model of “training the trainers” where a pool of expertise is developed in a particular locality and these experts train others in schools, youth clubs and in other relevant venues. This is an effective and economical way of working and develops community spirit. The Assembly has the advantage of having parliamentarians in constituencies across Europe. Many have already proved to be good ambassadors for work on child participation and could give inspiration and support to local initiatives, for example by encouraging visits to the European organisations in Strasbourg and Brussels (finance allowing) as well as to local political and trade union organisations. Advice and guidance already exist as I reflect in this report. The model of the Rights Respecting School programme and their “cascade model” has proven successful, as have other initiatives. They serve to embed training and development of resources at local levels and are therefore owned by local children and facilitators.

74. Meaningful participation requires more than just talking to children. Many teachers and youth workers are now familiar with teaching methods which give a voice to children, such as group work and role play. Others may not be confident about taking on this participatory work. But such a model as I have described can give practical help, as can sympathetic training of which there are a number of excellent ones, which I have mentioned.

75. The difficulty of reaching children from various backgrounds, especially vulnerable groups, needs to be addressed more assiduously. As I have said before, I am particularly concerned about those children who are vulnerable and underprivileged or suffer prejudice – those who live in poverty, are disabled, are from minority backgrounds, are migrants or refugees, or who identify as LGBTI+. It can happen that these children are not involved in activities such as debates, youth parliaments and school councils, often because they lack confidence or are simply disregarded. We need to be aware of this and ensure equality of opportunity for all children. It has also been mentioned to me that children living in rural areas are sometimes not included in plans to enhance participation.

76. Feedback from children shows that they feel most empowered when they are involved throughout the procedure and when there are opportunities for them to meet other children. They feel that they are listened to, and often go on to become human rights activists. Adult-led spaces and procedures are often overwhelming.

77. I am convinced that parliamentarians can be instrumental and a positive force in encouraging children to participate in, and contribute to, organisational thinking in the context of democratic societies and learning about child rights. Such participation needs to be given higher priority within the parliaments, and it should be integrated in the working methods, through the rules of procedure and the work of committees.

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53. International Conference on “Children’s Participation in Decision-Making and Policy-Making at European Union level”.

78. Any work with children must be done with care. Like for health professionals, “do no harm” should be the underlying principle for any action. Both adults and children need to be duly trained and prepared, to ensure respect and protection from excessive exposure or abuse. Any organisation working with children should have a safeguarding policy, as well as mechanisms to prevent and reduce negative experiences, and to address any issues promptly and effectively. I have often found it useful to consult with particular NGOs about child welfare when, for example, children visit parliament.

79. Children’s rights and the concept of democratic societies are closely linked. Learning about rights reinforces the strength of democracies and learning about democracy reinforces the need to understand rights. Given that democracy is currently facing many challenges, child participation is an essential tool for laying the foundations of future Europe that is prosperous, peaceful, fair, and caring.