

# child participation reference guide



An introduction  
to child participation

# Introduction

Children’s opinions matter. When opportunities are provided for children to participate, children powerfully express their opinions about their lives and communities. The purpose of this guide is to provide information about child participation in World Vision. The guide defines child participation, describes meaningful and safe participation, and explains the risks and challenges of participation.

This guide complements WV’s [Guidelines for Child Participation](#) and staff operationalise the principles in this guide through WV’s Development Programme Approach. Please refer to the [Guidance for Development Programmes](#) for further details and the tools and resources cited in this guide.

## What is child participation?

Child participation can be defined as children influencing the issues that affect their lives through voice or action. The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 led to increased attention to child participation. Participation is one of the key principles of the Convention, and Article 12 in particular describes a child’s right to participate. Article 12.1 of the CRC states that:

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

In 2009, the general comment on Article 12 describes child participation as an on-going process where adults and children share information, talk and listen to one another and make decisions jointly.<sup>1</sup>

## World Vision’s approach to child participation

World Vision’s approach to child participation is best understood within the context of our Ministry Framework and global theory of change, placing children at the center of all our work. WV works alongside local partners to prioritise children, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, and empower them together with their families and communities to improve their well-being. Building the skills and capacities of children to express their opinions and have genuine opportunities to contribute to community change is a central characteristic of WV’s child-focused approach.

World Vision recognises that child participation is not only a right, but an essential aspect of well-being. While child rights are foundational, WV’s child focus and special priority for the most vulnerable children goes beyond rights, placing child participation as an essential element for children to thrive.

### World Vision’s definition of child participation:

Child participation is when children under 18 years of age contribute to decisions and take action on issues that affect their lives. This is best done through empowering children and nurturing positive relationships between children, adults, and communities based on mutual respect and partnership at familial, local, national, and international levels.

### World Vision understands that child participation is both a:

- ▶ **Child Well-being Outcome** (Children are respected participants in decisions that affect their lives) and an important aspect of holistic well-being.  
*Children play an active role in their own development.*
- ▶ **Ministry principle and key characteristic** of WV’s approach to child-focused development.  
*Children play an active role in their community’s development.*

WV recognises children as agents of change who have an essential role to play in community development, advocacy, and emergency response and can **contribute meaningfully with the support of willing adults.**

<sup>1</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child. United Nations. *General Comment No. 12: The Right of the Child to be Heard*. Geneva, Switzerland, 2009. Print.

## What child participation is and is not:

Engaging children in meaningful ways is not an easy task. Often, adults can mistakenly equate child participation with handing all decision-making power over to children and diminishing the role and contribution of adults. Or the opposite may happen, where adults appear to consult children but in the end, do not give children's input true consideration or value in the decision-making process or activity. The following chart distinguishes what child participation actually is in practice from what it is not:<sup>2</sup>

CHILD PARTICIPATION IS:	CHILD PARTICIPATION IS NOT:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognising the value of children's knowledge and contributions</li><li>• Sharing experience, expertise and accurate information with children</li><li>• Learning from children and seeking out their input and feedback</li><li>• Intentionally providing opportunities for children to make decisions and implement them</li><li>• Helping children and adults to understand their rights and responsibilities</li><li>• Sharing decision-making power between adults and children</li><li>• Working towards respect for the rights of children in communities and at the national and international level</li><li>• Ensuring the best interest of the child by including their input.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suggesting to children what they should think or say</li><li>• Thinking adults have nothing to learn from children</li><li>• Devaluing an adult's experience and expertise</li><li>• Using children to do an adult's work</li><li>• Giving children the responsibilities of an adult</li><li>• Handing over all power or decision-making to children</li><li>• Automatically endorsing every opinion a child expresses</li><li>• Children disrespecting the authority and responsibility of adults</li><li>• Tokenistic.</li></ul>

## WV's five guiding principles for child participation:

When engaging children, WV follows five guiding principles that state our overarching intent for upholding the quality of all child participation activities:



- 1 Child participation **is a right and works to fulfil other child rights.**
- 2 Child participation **is ethical and safe.**
- 3 Child participation **is meaningful and sustainable.**
- 4 Child participation **strengthens familial, community, and societal relationships.**
- 5 Child participation **is a process and method across different sectors.**

<sup>2</sup> Castro, Patricia Horna. *Easier to Say than To Do: Children's Participation in Events with Adults*. Save the Children Sweden, 2007. Print.

# What makes child participation meaningful?

Any activity or project that involves children has the potential to have meaningful engagement. However, this is not a guarantee. Meaningful participation depends upon how projects are implemented, what information children have and the power-sharing dynamics between children and adults.

WV's [Guidelines for Child Participation](#) define the minimum basic expectations that, when in place, ensure meaningful and safe engagement of children. These ten guidelines operationalise the five guiding principles described above:

## The most vulnerable children are included and impacted

The principles of equality, inclusiveness and non-discrimination apply to every activity or project involving children. For child participation to be meaningful, intentional and effective engagement with the most vulnerable must be a priority.

- 1 Adults, relevant partners, children, and youth in the community are **continuously sensitised to the importance and value of child participation**.
- 2 WV staff members, partners and volunteers who facilitate child participation have the **competencies to work safely and effectively with children**.
- 3 **Children and caregivers give informed consent** for children to participate while recognising children's rights to freedom of association or peaceful assembly.
- 4 **WVI Child Protection Standards are in place and followed**.
- 5 Child participation **involves children in issues and decisions that are relevant to their daily lives** and concerns.
- 6 Child participation is **accessible, inclusive, and non-discriminatory**.
- 7 Child participation is **facilitative, not manipulative, and values children's input**.
- 8 Child participation activities and **methods are child-friendly**.
- 9 Child participation is conducted in ways that **lead to empowerment of children, youth who are responsible citizens, and community transformation**.
- 10 WV staff, partners, and volunteers **demonstrate accountability to children** through a commitment to timely feedback, monitoring, evaluation, and learning cycles with children that improve the quality of child participation.

For more information, see WV's [Guidelines for Child Participation](#).

# Degrees of child participation

It is important to recognise that there are varying degrees of child participation depending on how involved children are in decision making. Examples range from children giving opinions on pre-determined issues to children taking the lead role in initiating and implementing projects. Below is a diagram that shows the various degrees of participation. It is important to note that the lowest degree, 'coercion' is a form of non-participation and should always be avoided.<sup>3</sup>

## 5 Taking a leading role - 'action by'

### Child-initiated and directed

Children set the agenda and are active politically.

## 4 Collaboration and partnership - 'action with'

### Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children

Adults have the initial idea, but children are involved in every step of the planning and implementation.

### Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults

Children and their organisations invite adults to collaborate with them. Roles are defined together.

### Jointly-initiated by children and adults

Children and adults work in partnership to agree, and work together towards common goals.

## 3 Consultation - 'action with and by'

### Children are consulted and informed

The project is designed and run by adults, but they use the suggestions and concerns of the children. Children are informed so that they can make good decisions.

## 2 Informing - 'action for'

### Children are given a task and told what is required of them

Children are informed of, and in agreement about, actions that affect them. They might be able to choose to carry out the task.

## 1 Coercion - 'action on'

### Manipulation

Children do or say what adults want them to, but have no real understanding of the issues. Alternatively, children may be asked what they think, and adults then use some of the ideas without telling the children what influence they have had on the final decision.

### Decoration

Children take part in an event, such as singing or dancing, but have no influence over how it is organised.

### Tokenism

Children are asked their opinions but have little choice about the way that they can express those views or the range of ideas they can express.

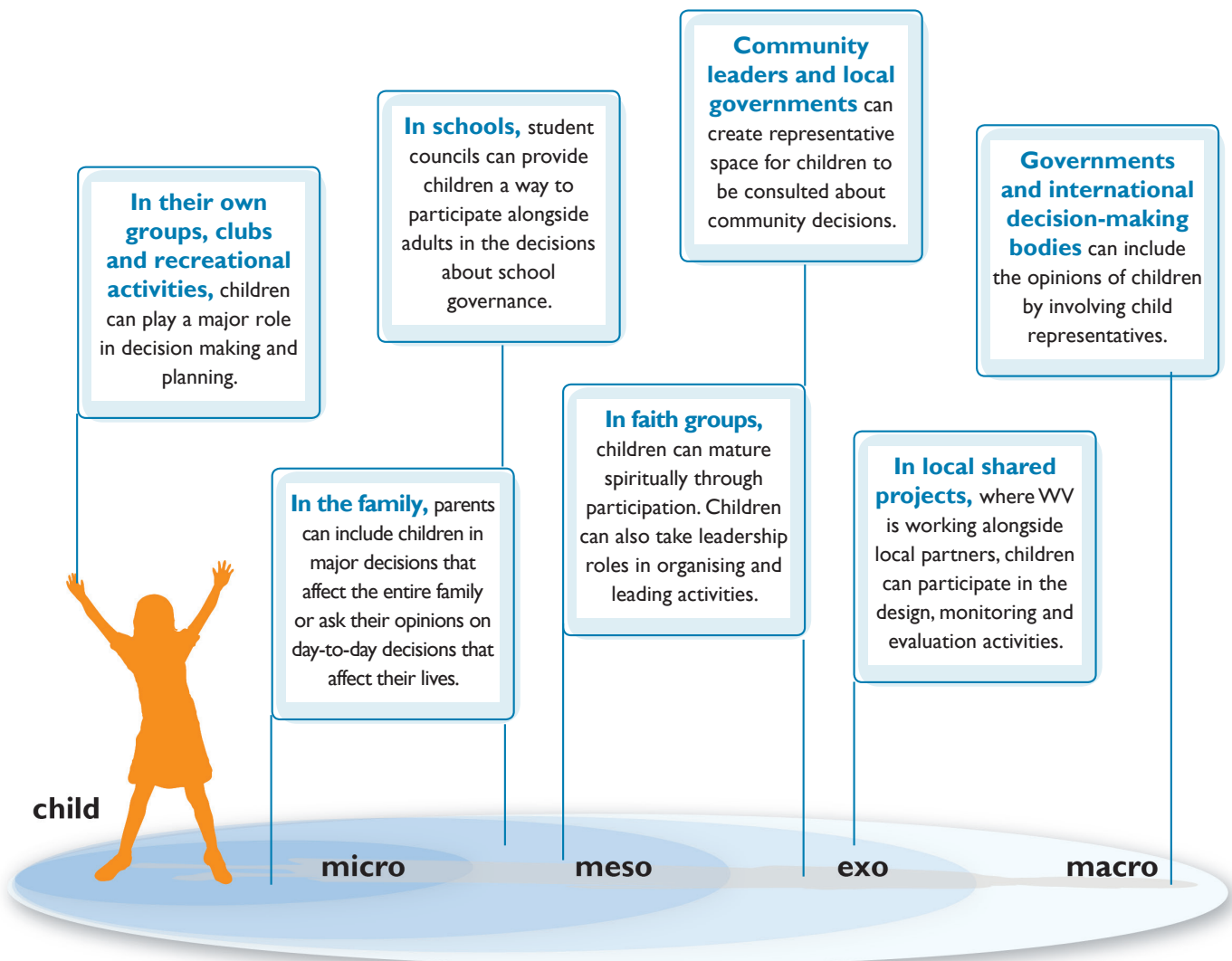
**Depending on the situation, different degrees or approaches to participation may be more appropriate than others.** It is not always best to aim for children to be the sole initiators of change within a community, especially if it has the potential to put children at risk. The cultural context, the capacity of adults to effectively engage with children and the evolving capacity of the children involved are all considerations in determining the right approach.

The [Child Protection Risk Assessment](#) tool for child participation enables staff to assess possible risks associated with involving children. By working through the tool, staff develop a risk management strategy for their programme context.

<sup>3</sup> Stephenson, Paul, et al. *Child Participation*. England: Tearfund, 2004. Print.

## Where and how can child participation take place?

An ecological understanding of well-being helps us to consider the different relationships, institutions, systems and structures that create a positive environment where children can thrive.<sup>4</sup> The illustrative examples below describe how children can meaningfully participate at different levels of their ecology.



Ultimately, sustainable child participation means that all actors view children as persons with rights, abilities and important perspectives. WV staff work alongside local partners to sustain the opportunities and spaces for child participation so that it becomes a normal aspect of community life.

### Child participation and the Developmental Assets<sup>®5</sup>

Assets are the skills, experiences, relationships and behaviours that enable children to thrive. Empowered children and adults can work together to build and strengthen existing assets as well as address gaps in their community. The more assets children have both as internal skills and competencies, and external within their families and communities, the better they are able to thrive and participate in meaningful ways.

The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) is a survey used with young people to understand their perceptions of their internal assets and the external assets in their family and community. The DAP measures projects related to the Child Well-being Outcome, 'children are respected participants in decisions that affect their lives' and is a recommended tool to measure Child Well-being Target #1, 'Children report an increased level of well-being'. Please refer to the [DAP Overview and Coordination Guide](#) for more information.

<sup>4</sup> Bronfenbrenner, Uri (1970)

<sup>5</sup> Visit Search Institute for more information.

# What are the benefits of child participation?

Empowered children can model new behaviours, relate to adults in more productive ways, and can ultimately contribute to a culture of democracy and transform society. Below are a few examples:<sup>6</sup>

## Benefits to children:

- ✓ Children can develop life skills such as communication and critical thinking skills, positive values, and social competencies.
- ✓ Children can gain a sense of achievement, positive identity and confidence in expressing opinions.
- ✓ Child participation can lead to the fulfilment of other rights and Child Well-being Outcomes.
- ✓ Children who regularly express their opinions are more likely to report rights violations, abuse or other forms of exploitation.<sup>7</sup>

## Benefits to adults

- ✓ Adults can learn from children directly about what is going on in their lives, instead of guessing.
- ✓ Relationships between children and adults can be strengthened for the benefit of both parties.
- ✓ Children can give adults a fresh perspective about the activities they are engaged in.

## Benefits to the community

- ✓ Children who are empowered can seek to reach out and care for others and take initiative to make changes in their communities.
- ✓ Active citizenship builds trust and responsibility and can reduce violence. When given opportunities for civic engagement, young people can bring energy, enthusiasm and new ideas to the development of their communities.
- ✓ Projects and interventions can be more relevant and effective when they are informed by the very people they are designed to benefit.

## Benefits to society

- ✓ As children grow and develop, they explore wider social relations and interact independently with the broader community.
- ✓ Investments in well-informed and educated citizens can have major benefits for economic growth and result in strengthened households and communities.
- ✓ Involvement in social organisations broadens access to economic opportunities, especially among previously excluded groups. Such engagement can also enhance collective action to increase the pressure on governments to provide good public services.<sup>8</sup>
- ✓ Children's civic engagement is essential for achieving the Millennium Development Goals and other development commitments, such as universal education and poverty reduction. Children's contributions improve services and policies.<sup>9</sup>
- ✓ Child participation is essential for community ownership that is representative; and community ownership is a driver of sustained change.

## Benefits to World Vision

- ✓ Child participation makes our work more valid and more effective.
- ✓ Child participation can increase WV's organisational accountability and responsiveness to children.

<sup>6</sup> Lynford, Hannah. *Putting Children at the Centre: A Practical Guide to Children's Participation*. London: International Save the Children Alliance, 2010. Print.

<sup>7</sup> *Here we Stand: World Vision and Child Rights*, 2nd Edition Expanded Version. Monrovia, CA: World Vision International, 2010. PDF file.

<sup>8</sup> Inter-agency Working Group on Children's Participation. *Children as Active Citizens*. IAWGCP, 2008. Print.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank. *Development and the Next Generation*. World Development Report 2007. World Bank, Washington, DC, Print.

## What is needed for effective participation?

Child participation can be new and a very different way of working for staff, local partners and the communities where we work. **Understanding potential challenges in each context is key for effective participation of children.** Two important considerations:

### ▶ Sharing power with children

It is important to acknowledge that in some places, the relationship between children and adults may be characterised by an unequal distribution of power. Child participation can be challenging to implement in a world where traditional adult-child roles do not necessarily allow for children's equal and active participation. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) writes that:

*The child's evolving capacity represents just one side of the equation: the other involves adults' evolving capacity and willingness to listen to and learn from their children, to understand and consider the child's point of view, to be willing to re-examine their own opinions and attitudes and to envisage solutions that address children's views. For adults, as well as for children, participation is a challenging learning process and cannot be reduced to a simple formality.*

### ▶ Cultural challenges

While different cultures add many positive aspects to working with children, there can also be cultural barriers that make it difficult for children to be included in decision-making. For example, communities may be resistant to child participation because:

- children are culturally regarded as inferior
- children are expected to remain silent and submissive to parents and other adults
- certain children may be socially excluded from community life
- activities that do not directly contribute to income generation or household tasks are regarded as disrespectful or not important
- speaking out on sensitive issues places a child in danger or at risk of retaliation
- children speaking out against local authorities or government systems poses a significant threat to the safety of children and communities
- there is a lack of freedom of expression.

## How to prepare for effective participation:

While child participation refers to children contributing to decisions that affect their daily lives, WV staff and local partners play a major role in making this a reality. WV staff can model effective engagement with children and also build the capacity of local partners to sustain participation efforts.

### Prepare the facilitators:

The [\*Integrated Competency Development\*](#) (ICD) resources have been designed to strengthen the capacity of local level staff implementing WV's Development Programme Approach. A core competency for local level staff is [\*CEP03: Facilitate the Engagement of Children\*](#). This competency describes the behaviours needed to work effectively with children, their caregivers and other community members. These include:

- to communicate effectively with children
- to motivate and encourage all children to develop and share their views, including the most vulnerable
- to engage children in child-friendly and age appropriate ways, by using fun activities, games and tools
- to show genuine care and concern for all children.
- to address the fears, risks and hesitancy of children to participate
- to empower children to care for the needs of others in their community.



## In addition to staff development, other conditions that are critical include:

### Prepare World Vision:

- to ensure that each office has the will and organisational priority to support the participation of boys and girls, especially the most vulnerable children
- to ensure the time, resources and capacity of staff, volunteers and local partners to be effective in facilitating the meaningful engagement of children
- to ensure WV's Child Protection policy is in place and understood by staff engaging with children; and that a risk assessment has been conducted to ensure the context is safe for child participation.

### Prepare adults (including caregivers):

- to de-mystify and address any misconceptions about child participation that adults may have
- to gain support for child participation by reducing stigma towards children, especially the most vulnerable
- to have consistent dialogue with other adults about the right to participation and the value of both boys' and girls' participation in the family and wider community.

### Prepare the wider community:

- to address cultural traditions that are barriers to child participation, especially practices that excludes children that are marginalised due to their ability, religion, ethnicity or any other type of status
- to create space for ongoing intergenerational dialogue between children and adults
- to share the initiatives and successes of children; highlighting children's capacity and agency.

### Advocate for child participation in public spaces:

- to develop coalitions with government bodies to promote the participation of children in public policy processes
- to call on national and international decision-makers to formally acknowledge child participation as a key element to civic life
- to promote the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols.

## Conclusion

Engaging in child participation should be considered a long-term commitment to the well-being of children within communities. While changing the ways World Vision views children, works with them, and approaches communities may take time, the process of inviting children to have a voice at the table is a deeply spiritual and meaningful endeavour.

Ultimately, overcoming the barriers and challenges to the meaningful participation of children means developing relationships with partners and community members (adults and children alike) where child participation can be discussed. It means committing to a long-term process of walking with people to overcome doubts and prejudices against the abilities of children. It also means inviting them into a process of transformation where children's capacities and contributions to their families and communities are encouraged and recognised.

For more information:

- Go to [www.wvcentral.org](http://www.wvcentral.org) to join the Child Well-being and Rights Community of Practice.
- Go to [www.wvdevelopment.org](http://www.wvdevelopment.org) for a set of resources for WV programme staff as they implement WV's Development Programme Approach with local partners and communities.