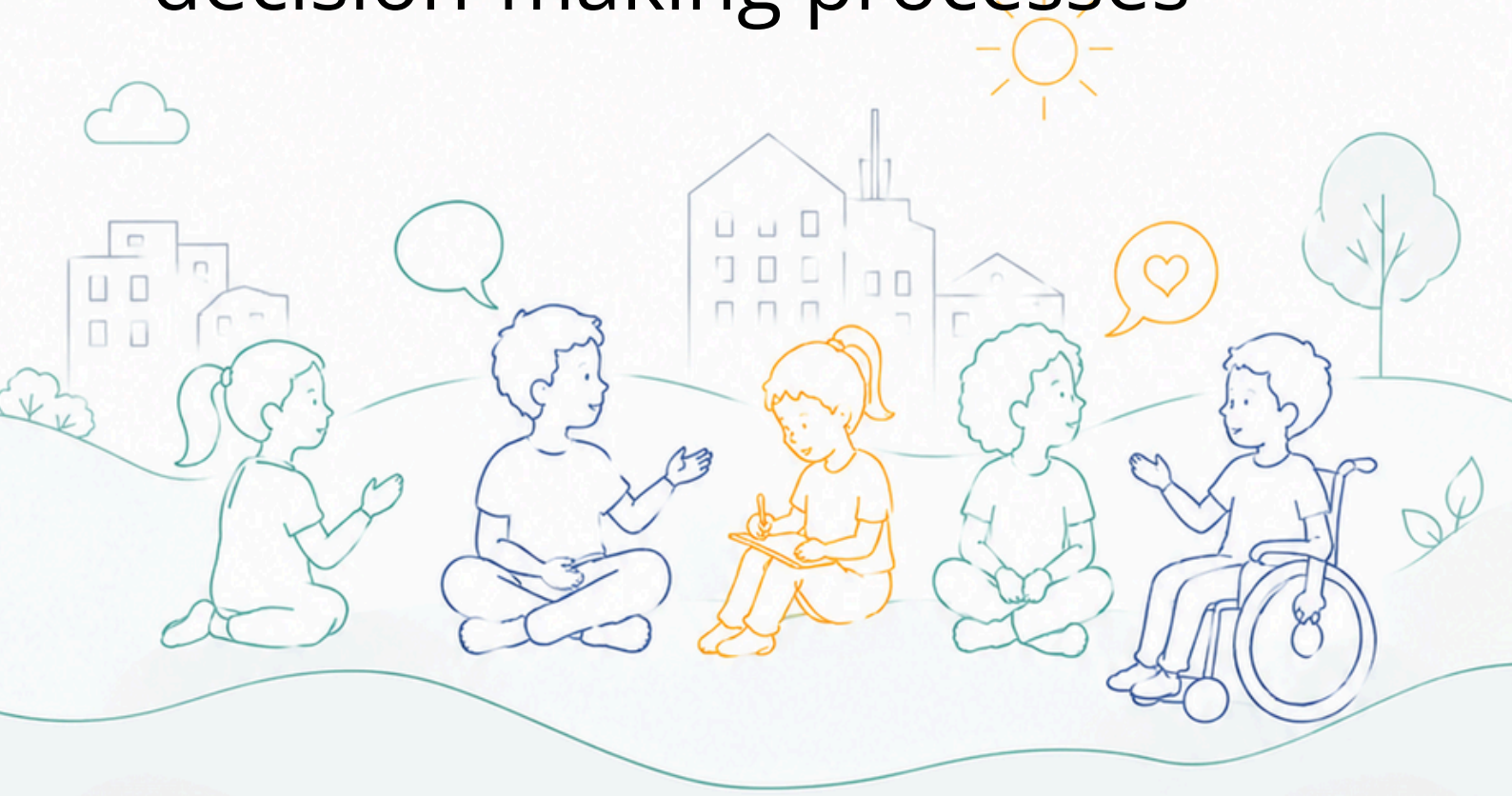
Cross-Country Report

Child participation in decision-making processes



ChildACT+

Co-funded by the European Union



Table of Contents

Introduction and research methodology 01

Thematic Comparative Analysis 05

Analysis of Barriers 20

Policy Areas and Children's Priorities 24

Inclusion and Intersectionality Analysis 26

Actionable Recommendations 28

Conclusion 30

Introduction and Research Methodology

Introduction

Children's participation in decision-making is a fundamental right recognised under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which affirms the right of every child to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Over the past two decades, European countries have increasingly incorporated this principle into legislation, policy frameworks and institutional structures. However, the extent to which these commitments translate into meaningful opportunities for children to influence decisions remains uneven.

This report presents a comparative analysis of child participation in decision-making across five European countries participating in the ChildACT+ project: Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Romania and Spain. Drawing on national research conducted by project partners, the report examines how children's participation is institutionalised, how participation mechanisms operate in practice, and what barriers and enabling factors shape children's ability to influence decisions affecting their lives. Rather than presenting five different national stories, this report ***reveals one European pattern expressed through five different governance systems.***

The consistency of findings across five different governance systems suggests that the challenges identified are not country-specific implementation failures but rather reflect broader European trends in the evolution of children's participation strategies. The analysis focuses not only on the existence of legal and institutional frameworks, but also on children's lived experiences of participation.

Particular attention is given to the relationship between formal participation mechanisms and actual influence, the accessibility of participation opportunities, and the extent to which participation processes are inclusive of children from diverse backgrounds.

The findings provide an evidence base for strengthening child participation at local, national and European levels and tries to answer a crucial question: ***to what extent are children able to influence public decision-making in the five participating countries, and what conditions enable or hinder meaningful participation?***

For the purposes of this report, meaningful participation refers not only to opportunities for children to express their views, but also to processes that ensure those views are considered, influence decisions and are followed by appropriate feedback and accountability mechanisms.

Research Methodology

The report synthesises findings from five national studies conducted between April-June 2026 as part of Work Package 2 of the ChildACT+ project. Each national study followed a common methodological framework designed to assess both the formal institutionalisation of child participation and the practical experiences of children and practitioners. Data collection combined four complementary methods.

First, **desk research** was undertaken at national and local levels. This included the analysis of legislation, policy documents, strategic frameworks, municipal regulations, participation mechanisms and existing research related to child and youth participation.

Second, **qualitative interviews** were conducted with children and young people from diverse local contexts, including larger urban areas and rural municipalities.

These interviews explored awareness of participation opportunities, experiences of engagement with decision-makers, perceptions of influence, barriers to participation and priorities for local action.

Third, **interviews** were conducted with **practitioners and representatives** working in the fields of youth participation, child rights, education, youth work and local governance. These interviews provided insight into the functioning of participation mechanisms, institutional capacities and implementation challenges.

Fourth, **focus groups** were organised with **civil society organisations and professionals** working directly with children and young people. These discussions were used to validate emerging findings and identify broader structural trends.

In addition, partners sought information from selected municipalities through FOIA requests and direct inquiries to departments responsible for youth and child participation, to assess transparency, accountability and the availability of information relating to child participation mechanisms.

Across the five countries, the research examined a diverse range of national, regional and local contexts, including capital cities, medium-sized municipalities, smaller towns and rural areas. This comparative approach enabled the identification of both shared challenges and context-specific dynamics.

Scope and Limitations

The findings presented in this report are based primarily on qualitative research and should be interpreted accordingly. The study does not aim to provide statistically representative data on child participation in the five countries. Instead, it seeks to generate an in-depth understanding of how participation is experienced and implemented within selected contexts.

Several limitations were identified across the national studies. Recruitment challenges were reported in multiple countries, particularly during end-of-school-year periods when young people and practitioners had limited availability. As a result, participants were often recruited through existing professional networks, schools, youth organisations and youth work structures.

A further limitation concerns participation bias. Across countries, children and young people already connected to schools, youth organisations, youth councils or civic initiatives were generally easier to reach than those who were less engaged, socially isolated or disconnected from participation structures. This limitation is itself relevant to the findings, as it reflects broader challenges relating to inclusion and accessibility.

The local contexts analysed also vary considerably in terms of population size, governance structures, administrative capacity and existing participation traditions. These differences limit direct comparison of individual municipalities. The report therefore focuses on identifying broader themes and patterns rather than evaluating the relative performance of specific locations.

Despite these limitations, the consistency of findings across multiple countries, data sources and participant groups provides a robust basis for comparative analysis.



Thematic Comparative Analysis

Institutionalisation of Children's Participation

The five national reports demonstrate that children's participation is increasingly recognised within legal and policy frameworks across Europe. All countries examined have established formal commitments to participation through legislation, national strategies, institutional structures or sector-specific mechanisms. However, the degree to which these commitments are translated into consistent and meaningful participation opportunities varies significantly.

Romania represents the **most significant recent legislative development** among the participating countries. The adoption of Law No. 295/2024 introduced a dedicated legal framework requiring national and local public authorities to consult children aged 14 to 18, establish permanent participation mechanisms and designate staff responsible for facilitating children's participation. The legislation marks an important shift from voluntary engagement towards legally mandated participation and reflects a growing recognition of children as stakeholders in public decision-making.

Estonia presents **one of the most developed participation architectures** within the sample. Participation mechanisms are embedded across multiple governance levels and are supported by established structures such as youth councils, student representation systems and national policy frameworks. Children's participation is broadly recognised as a legitimate component of democratic governance rather than an isolated policy area.



Latvia also demonstrates a **relatively strong formal framework.** Youth participation is recognised through legislation governing youth policy, child rights, education and local government. Municipalities are encouraged to establish youth councils, youth advisory structures and participatory mechanisms, while national policy documents identify participation as a key objective of youth policy development.

Spain has developed an **extensive legal and strategic framework** for children's rights and participation. National legislation establishes participation as a right and provides the basis for national participation structures. However, implementation remains highly uneven across municipalities. While some local authorities have developed long-standing participation mechanisms and dedicated child participation structures, others lack permanent arrangements altogether.

Italy similarly **recognises children's participation** within broader child rights and youth policy frameworks. However, the Italian case places greater emphasis on local initiatives, partnerships and community-based approaches than on highly standardised institutional structures. Participation opportunities are frequently shaped by local capacity, civic engagement traditions and the presence of active civil society organisations.

Despite these differences, a common pattern emerges across all five countries. **Formal recognition of participation is no longer the principal challenge.** Legal frameworks, policy commitments and participation mechanisms are present to varying degrees in every national context examined. The more significant challenge concerns implementation.

The existence of participation structures does not necessarily guarantee meaningful influence, consistent engagement or equal access to decision-making processes.

As a result, the central question emerging from the comparative analysis is no longer whether children's participation is formally recognised, but **how institutions translate legal commitments into everyday practice and whether participation mechanisms enable children to influence decisions in ways that are visible, meaningful and accountable.**



From Consultation to Influence

Across all five countries, children and young people reported opportunities to express their views, participate in consultations, engage in youth councils, contribute to projects, or take part in civic initiatives. However, the evidence suggests that the existence of participation opportunities **does not automatically result in meaningful influence on decisions.** **The most consistent finding across the five national reports is the gap between being consulted and being able to demonstrate that participation has shaped outcomes.**

While participation mechanisms differ significantly between countries, concerns regarding influence, feedback and accountability emerge with remarkable consistency.

Children and young people frequently described situations in which they were asked for opinions but received little information about how those opinions were used, whether they influenced decisions, or why certain proposals were not implemented.

In Spain, this pattern emerged particularly clearly during interviews with young people. Participants reported having little experience of direct engagement with municipal decision-making and struggled to identify examples where children's input had resulted in concrete institutional change. The report notes that young people were often unable to identify a single instance in which their participation had altered a municipal decision-making process. This finding was reinforced by interviews with practitioners and by desk research examining local participation mechanisms.

Latvia produced similar findings. Although both Riga and Jēkabpils provide multiple formal and informal participation opportunities, young people frequently described uncertainty regarding the outcomes of their participation. Several participants reported submitting ideas, attending consultations or engaging with local authorities without subsequently receiving information about what happened to their proposals. In some cases, participants described participation processes as ending after consultation, with no visible follow-up or explanation regarding decisions taken. The **absence of systematic feedback emerged as one of the most significant barriers affecting young people's perception of participation.**

Estonia presents a different institutional context but reaches a similar conclusion. Participation structures are more developed and participation opportunities are widely available.

Nevertheless, young people and practitioners highlighted concerns regarding tokenistic participation and limited influence over final decisions. Formal participation mechanisms often function effectively as channels for consultation, but children do not always perceive a direct connection between their contributions and policy outcomes. This creates a risk that participation becomes procedural rather than transformative.

The Romanian findings illustrate the issue from a legislative perspective. The adoption of Law No. 295/2024 establishes clear obligations for public authorities to consult children and create permanent participation mechanisms. However, the report repeatedly highlights the absence of monitoring and accountability systems capable of assessing whether consultations influence decisions in practice. While the legal framework establishes participation rights, there is currently no comprehensive mechanism for evaluating whether children's views are incorporated into policy development or whether public institutions respond to recommendations emerging from consultation processes.

Italy similarly identifies a distinction between participation opportunities and meaningful influence. While numerous local initiatives create spaces for dialogue and engagement, participation is often dependent on the commitment of individual organisations and practitioners. The report emphasises that meaningful participation requires more than opportunities to speak. It requires processes through which children can observe how their contributions affect decisions, services and community life.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that the principal challenge across all five countries is not the absence of participation opportunities. Rather, it is **the absence of mechanisms that connect participation to decision-making in visible and accountable ways.**

Three recurring issues emerge:

1. **Feedback mechanisms are frequently weak or absent.**
Children are often informed about opportunities to participate, but are not systematically informed about outcomes.

2. **Participation processes often conclude once children's views have been collected.**
Less attention is given to subsequent stages of decision-making, implementation and evaluation.

3. **Institutions rarely document the impact of participation in ways that are accessible to children themselves.**
As a result, even where participation influences decisions, young people may remain unaware of its effects.



These findings suggest that the quality of participation should not be assessed solely by the number of consultations, meetings or participation structures in place. A more meaningful assessment requires examining whether participation influences decisions and whether institutions can demonstrate how children's views contributed to outcomes.

The comparative evidence therefore points towards a broader understanding of participation. Effective participation is not a single event. It is a process that includes consultation, dialogue, decision-making, implementation and feedback. Weaknesses in any part of this cycle reduce the likelihood that children will perceive participation as meaningful and reduce their willingness to engage in future processes.

The distinction between consultation and influence identified across the five countries reflects broader debates within child participation literature regarding the difference between symbolic participation and meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

Local Implementation and Territorial Disparities

One of the most significant findings emerging from the five national reports is the extent to which children's participation is shaped by local contexts. While national legislation establishes the broad framework within which participation takes place, the practical opportunities available to children are often determined by municipal capacity, political commitment, institutional culture and local partnerships.

Across all five countries, substantial variation was observed between municipalities operating within the same national legal framework. This finding suggests that legislation alone cannot explain differences in participation outcomes.

Spain provides one of the clearest examples of this phenomenon. The municipalities examined in the national report demonstrate markedly different approaches to children's participation despite operating under the same legal framework. Quart de Poblet has maintained a Municipal Council for Children and Adolescents since 2006, incorporates children's input into local planning processes and has developed dedicated institutional structures to support participation.

By contrast, larger municipalities such as Vigo and València lack permanent participation councils despite operating within a national and regional framework that recognises children's participation as a right. The contrast demonstrates how local political commitment and institutional investment shape participation opportunities independently of national legislation.

Latvia similarly reveals important territorial differences. Riga benefits from greater financial resources, a larger network of youth organisations, specialised youth centres and more diverse participation channels. Jēkabpils, by contrast, operates within a geographically dispersed municipality where participation opportunities are affected by transport infrastructure, distance and access to services. While both municipalities have established participation mechanisms, the practical experience of participation differs considerably due to local conditions.

The issue of territorial inequality is also prominent in Romania. The most developed participation practices identified in the report are concentrated in municipalities that possess greater administrative capacity and established partnerships with civil society organisations. Initiatives such as participatory budgeting programmes, Child Friendly Cities processes and youth advisory structures are largely associated with municipalities that have dedicated resources and expertise. The report highlights concerns that children living in rural or disadvantaged communities may have significantly fewer opportunities to participate meaningfully in public decision-making.

Estonia and Italy reveal similar patterns. Although participation mechanisms exist nationally, the quality and accessibility of participation opportunities often depend on local actors, local priorities and the availability of institutional support. Municipalities with active youth workers, supportive schools, committed decision-makers and strong civil society organisations tend to provide more meaningful opportunities for participation than those where such conditions are absent.

The comparative evidence, therefore, suggests that children's participation remains highly territorial. Children living within the same country may experience very different levels of access to participation depending on where they live. Several factors appear to influence these differences:

- **Administrative capacity** is particularly important. Municipalities with dedicated staff, established participation structures and long-term planning frameworks are generally better positioned to support sustained participation.
- **Financial resources** also play a significant role. Participation mechanisms require coordination, facilitation, communication and follow-up. Municipalities with limited budgets often struggle to maintain participation processes beyond individual projects or consultation exercises.
- **Geography** represents a further challenge. Rural municipalities frequently face additional barriers related to transport, service accessibility and the physical distance between young people and participation opportunities. These issues were particularly visible in Latvia but were also identified elsewhere.
- Finally, l**ocal political commitment** emerges as a decisive factor. In several countries, the strongest participation examples were found in municipalities where elected representatives and public officials actively championed children's participation and allocated resources to support it.

The findings suggest that strengthening children's participation requires attention not only to national legislation but also to the local conditions that enable participation to function effectively. Without sufficient local capacity, even strong legal frameworks may produce uneven outcomes. Conversely, committed municipalities can often develop innovative participation practices even in contexts where national guidance remains limited.

This highlights the importance of examining children's participation as a multi-level governance issue, shaped by interactions between national frameworks, local institutions and community actors.

The Role of Schools, Youth Workers and Civil Society

Across all five countries, **schools, youth workers and civil society organisations emerge as critical actors in facilitating children's participation.** While legislation, policies and formal participation mechanisms create the framework for participation, these actors frequently provide the practical support that enables children to engage with decision-making processes.

The evidence suggests that children's participation is rarely sustained by institutional structures alone. Instead, participation often depends on trusted adults who provide information, facilitate engagement, support communication with decision-makers and help children navigate complex administrative processes.

Schools represent the most common entry point into participation. Across all five countries, student councils, school self-government structures, classroom consultations and school-based projects were identified as some of the first opportunities through which children experience collective decision-making. Schools are particularly important because they reach large numbers of children regardless of their socio-economic background and can provide regular opportunities for participation within familiar environments.

However, the reports also suggest that school participation does not always translate into broader civic participation. In several countries, student participation remains confined to school-related issues and is only weakly connected to municipal or national decision-making processes.

While schools can play an important role in developing participation skills and democratic competencies, stronger connections between educational settings and public decision-making structures remain necessary.

Youth workers emerge as particularly important intermediaries. The Latvian report repeatedly highlights the role of youth workers in helping young people understand participation opportunities, develop ideas and engage with municipal structures. Both young people and practitioners described youth workers as trusted figures capable of bridging the gap between young people and public institutions. Similar observations appear in the Spanish, Estonian and Italian reports, where participation initiatives often depend on individuals capable of facilitating dialogue between children and decision-makers.

Civil society organisations play an equally significant role. In several countries, some of the most innovative participation practices identified through the research were developed through partnerships between public institutions and civil society organisations.

Romania provides particularly strong examples. Participatory budgeting initiatives, children's advisory councils and Child Friendly Cities processes have frequently been developed through collaboration between municipalities and civil society organisations. The report concludes that many of the most meaningful participation opportunities available to children have emerged through such partnerships rather than through the direct implementation of legal obligations alone.

Italy similarly emphasises the role of community organisations, youth associations and local initiatives in creating environments where children can participate meaningfully.

Rather than relying exclusively on formal consultation structures, many participation opportunities are embedded within community settings where relationships, trust and continuity can be developed over time.

The Spanish report identifies a similar pattern. In municipalities where formal participation structures are weak or absent, participation often depends on schools, associations and individual practitioners willing to create opportunities for engagement. The sustainability of participation is therefore frequently linked to the continued presence of committed individuals rather than institutional guarantees.

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective participation depends on a broader participation ecosystem. Legal frameworks and formal structures remain important, but they are most effective when supported by schools, youth workers and civil society organisations capable of translating participation rights into meaningful experiences.

The findings also highlight a potential vulnerability. In many contexts, participation depends heavily on specific individuals or organisations. When funding ends, staff change or projects conclude, participation opportunities may disappear. Strengthening children's participation therefore requires not only creating opportunities for engagement but also embedding participation within sustainable institutional arrangements.

Emerging Participation Models and Promising Practices

Although the reports identify significant challenges, they also provide evidence of innovative approaches that demonstrate the potential for meaningful participation when appropriate conditions are in place. Across the five countries, several participation models emerge repeatedly as particularly promising.



Participatory budgeting is one of the most frequently cited examples. Unlike traditional consultation processes, participatory budgeting enables children and young people to engage directly with decision-making regarding the allocation of resources.

Examples were identified in Romania, Latvia, Estonia and Spain. Romanian municipalities such as Timișoara have developed participatory budgeting initiatives targeted at young people, while Latvia and Estonia have implemented municipal and school-based models that give young people a direct role in allocating resources. Spain highlights participation linked to local planning and community development. These approaches move beyond consultation by enabling young people to shape outcomes directly.



Youth councils and advisory structures represent a second important model. Such mechanisms exist in various forms across all five countries. Their effectiveness varies considerably, but the strongest examples demonstrate the value of creating regular channels through which children and young people can engage with decision-makers over extended periods rather than through one-off consultations.



A third promising approach involves **project-based participation.** Latvia's youth initiative projects, Romania's local civic engagement programmes, Estonia's youth self-initiative funds and several Italian community-based initiatives allow young people to design and implement their own activities. These approaches appear particularly effective because they provide visible results within relatively short timeframes and allow young people to exercise ownership over participation processes.



Digital and creative participation methods also emerge as innovative practices. The Latvian and Estonian reports identify opportunities associated with digital participation, while the Riga "Minecraft" urban planning project demonstrates how creative methods can make participation more accessible and engaging for children and young people. Such approaches may be particularly valuable for reaching participants who are less likely to engage through traditional consultation formats.



The Romanian **Child-Friendly Cities initiatives** provide another important example. These approaches seek to integrate participation across multiple areas of local governance rather than treating participation as an isolated activity. By embedding children's participation within broader planning and service delivery processes, they demonstrate how participation can become part of everyday governance rather than an occasional consultation exercise.

Despite differences in design and context, the most successful examples share several common characteristics.

- They provide opportunities for sustained engagement rather than one-off consultation.
- They offer visible outcomes that allow participants to observe the effects of their contributions.
- They are supported by dedicated facilitators, youth workers or participation coordinators.
- They provide child-friendly information and accessible participation formats.
- They create opportunities for collaboration rather than limiting children to advisory roles.

These findings suggest that meaningful participation is not linked to a single institutional model. Instead, successful participation depends on the quality of processes, the availability of support and the extent to which children can observe a connection between participation and outcomes.

Analysis of Barriers

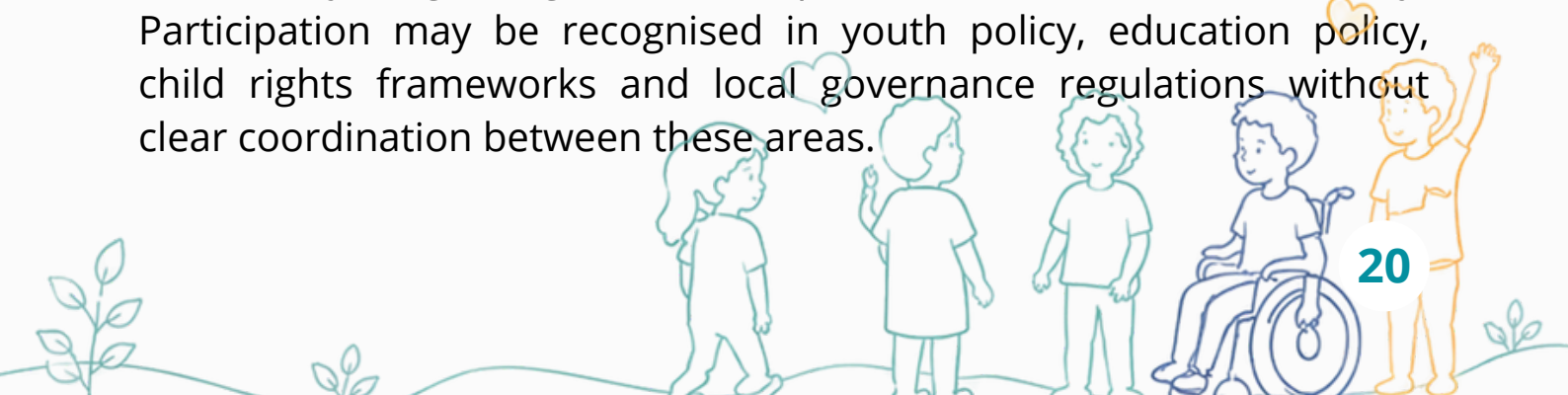
Structural Barriers

The research identified a series of structural barriers that limit the effectiveness of children's participation across the five countries.

The most significant structural challenge concerns **the gap between formal commitments and implementation.** While all five countries have developed legal frameworks, policies or institutional structures supporting participation, implementation remains inconsistent.

In Romania, concerns focus on **the absence of monitoring and accountability mechanisms capable of assessing whether newly established legal obligations are being implemented effectively.** In Spain, **implementation varies significantly between municipalities** despite the existence of a national legislative framework. In Latvia, **participation mechanisms are formally available but their impact is not systematically documented**. In Estonia, **implementation challenges are linked primarily to limited trust in young people's capacities** and the absence of feedback mechanisms demonstrating how their input has been used, with similar implementation challenges being identified in Italy.

A second structural barrier concerns **fragmentation.** Responsibility for children's participation is frequently distributed across multiple institutions, sectors and levels of government. This can create uncertainty regarding roles, responsibilities and accountability. Participation may be recognised in youth policy, education policy, child rights frameworks and local governance regulations without clear coordination between these areas.



Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers relate to the capacity of organisations and public authorities to support participation effectively.

A recurring finding concerns dependence on individual actors. In many contexts, participation is sustained by particularly committed teachers, youth workers, civil servants or civil society organisations. While these actors create valuable opportunities, participation remains vulnerable when institutional support is weak.

Staff capacity is another significant issue. Municipalities often face competing priorities and limited resources. Participation requires time, facilitation skills, communication efforts and ongoing follow-up. Where dedicated staff are unavailable, participation may become occasional rather than systematic.

Project dependency also emerged as a common challenge. Many participation opportunities rely on temporary funding streams or externally funded initiatives. While such projects can generate innovation, they do not necessarily create sustainable participation mechanisms.

The weakness of feedback mechanisms constitutes a further institutional barrier. Across countries, institutions often focus on collecting children's views but invest less effort in communicating outcomes and explaining how decisions were reached.

Accessibility Barriers

Accessibility barriers affect children's ability to participate even where opportunities formally exist. Geographical inequalities were particularly visible in Latvia and Romania but were also identified elsewhere.

Children living in rural areas often face additional challenges related to transport, distance and access to services. Participation opportunities may be concentrated in urban centres, making them less accessible to young people living in remote communities.

Information barriers are also significant. Many young people reported uncertainty regarding available participation opportunities, how to engage with decision-makers or where to obtain relevant information. Opportunities may exist without being visible to those who are not already connected to participation networks.

Age-related barriers were identified in several countries. Some formal participation mechanisms are only accessible to older adolescents, leaving younger children with fewer opportunities to influence decisions.

Accessibility concerns also affect children with disabilities and children facing social or economic disadvantage. While most legal frameworks formally recognise participation rights, practical measures supporting accessibility and inclusion remain uneven.

Participation Culture Barriers

The research also highlights cultural barriers that affect children's willingness and ability to participate. Many young people expressed doubts regarding the value of participation. Previous experiences of consultation without visible outcomes can reduce motivation and contribute to perceptions that participation is largely symbolic.

Fear of speaking publicly, lack of confidence and uncertainty regarding institutional processes were also frequently reported. These barriers are particularly significant for children who are not already engaged in participation activities.

The reports also identify a tendency for participation opportunities to attract children who are already active, confident and connected to existing networks. This can reinforce existing inequalities and create a perception that participation is reserved for a limited group of highly engaged young people.

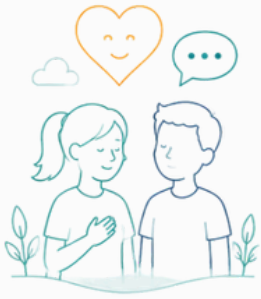
Taken together, these barriers suggest that participation is influenced not only by institutional arrangements but also by trust, confidence, motivation and perceptions of efficacy. Strengthening participation therefore requires attention to both structural conditions and participation culture.

Policy Areas and Children's Priorities

One of the most important findings emerging from the research concerns the issues that **children themselves identify as priorities for participation.** Across the five countries, participants consistently expressed a desire to influence matters that directly affect their daily lives rather than abstract political questions. Several themes emerged repeatedly.



Education was frequently identified as an important area for participation. Young people expressed interest in influencing school environments, educational quality, student representation and learning conditions.



Mental health and wellbeing also emerged as a recurring concern. Participants highlighted the importance of accessible support services, safe environments and greater recognition of mental health challenges affecting children and young people.





Transport and mobility featured prominently, particularly in Latvia and Romania. Young people linked mobility directly to participation, noting that difficulties accessing transport can limit opportunities to engage in social, educational and civic activities.



Public spaces and youth spaces were another recurring theme. Participants emphasised the importance of accessible places where young people can meet, organise activities and engage with their communities.



Environmental issues, urban development and community planning also featured prominently. Several examples demonstrated young people's interest in contributing to decisions concerning local infrastructure, neighbourhood development and environmental sustainability.

The findings suggest that children are **primarily interested in influencing decisions that have visible and immediate consequences for their daily lives.** Participation mechanisms that connect directly to these priorities may therefore be more effective in sustaining engagement than those focused solely on formal governance processes.

Inclusion and Intersectionality Analysis

The evidence from all five countries indicates that inclusion remains one of the most significant challenges facing children's participation. Although participation rights are generally framed as universal, participation opportunities are not experienced equally by all children.

The most consistent pattern concerns the over-representation of already engaged young people. Across countries, participation mechanisms tend to attract children connected to youth councils, student organisations, youth centres, schools and civil society organisations. Children outside these networks are significantly less visible within participation processes.

Geographical inequalities constitute a second major challenge. Rural children frequently face additional barriers related to transport, infrastructure and access to participation opportunities. This issue was particularly visible in Latvia and Romania but was also present elsewhere.

Socio-economic disadvantage emerged as another important factor. Children from lower-income households, socially excluded communities and vulnerable backgrounds often face additional barriers to engagement. Several reports noted the absence of systematic data regarding the participation of disadvantaged groups, making it difficult to assess the extent of inequalities.

Children with disabilities face similar challenges. While disability is recognised within broader inclusion frameworks, few examples were identified of participation mechanisms specifically designed to ensure accessibility and meaningful engagement for children with diverse needs.

The findings also suggest that barriers to participation rarely stem from a single source of disadvantage. In several countries, exclusion is shaped by the interaction of multiple factors, including socio-economic disadvantage, migration background, disability, psychological vulnerability, social isolation and limited access to supportive community environments. These factors often reinforce one another, creating cumulative barriers that reduce children's opportunities to participate and influence decisions.

Gender differences appeared less pronounced than other forms of inequality. However, several reports noted variations in participation patterns, interests and participation formats, suggesting that participation mechanisms should remain attentive to gender dynamics and avoid assuming uniform experiences.

A broader concern emerging from the analysis is that participation mechanisms may unintentionally reproduce existing inequalities. Those who are already confident, informed and connected to participation structures are often the most likely to participate, while children facing multiple forms of disadvantage remain underrepresented. Several reports noted that participation processes continue to struggle to engage groups that are socially isolated, marginalised or disconnected from existing civic networks, partly because institutions often lack effective approaches for reaching and supporting these young people.

Addressing this challenge requires moving beyond open invitations and developing proactive outreach strategies capable of engaging children who are least likely to participate through conventional channels.

Actionable Recommendations

National Level

- National governments should strengthen monitoring and accountability mechanisms relating to children's participation.
- Legal obligations should be accompanied by clear reporting requirements, indicators and evaluation frameworks capable of assessing both the quality and impact of participation processes.
- National authorities should also support the collection of disaggregated participation data to better understand who participates, who remains excluded and where participation gaps persist.

Municipal Level

- Municipalities should establish permanent and predictable participation structures that enable ongoing engagement rather than relying exclusively on one-off consultations.
- Particular attention should be given to creating formal feedback mechanisms. Children should be informed about how their views were considered, what decisions were taken and why particular proposals were accepted or rejected.
- Municipalities should also strengthen links between participation processes and decision-making, ensuring that children's contributions are integrated throughout policy development, implementation and evaluation.



Practice Level

- Schools, youth workers and civil society organisations should be recognised as key partners in participation ecosystems.
- Investment in youth work capacity, participation facilitation skills and child-friendly communication methods can strengthen the quality of participation experiences.
- Participation opportunities should be diversified to accommodate different interests, abilities and preferences, including project-based activities, digital participation, participatory budgeting and community-based initiatives.

Inclusion and Accessibility

- Targeted measures should be developed to reach children who are underrepresented in participation processes, including rural children, children with disabilities, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those not connected to existing participation networks.
- Participation mechanisms should be designed with accessibility, inclusion and outreach in mind from the outset rather than treating these issues as secondary considerations.

Conclusion

The findings of this report suggest that the principal challenge facing children's participation in the five participating countries is no longer the recognition of participation as a right. Significant progress has been made in establishing legal frameworks, participation structures and policy commitments.

The challenge now is ensuring that participation becomes meaningful, inclusive and influential. The countries with the strongest participation outcomes are not necessarily those with the strongest legislation; they are the ones that **combine structures with trusted adults, accessible spaces, continuous engagement and visible outcomes.**

Children across the five countries consistently demonstrated a willingness to engage with issues affecting their communities and their lives. However, meaningful participation requires more than opportunities to express opinions. It requires institutions that listen, respond, provide feedback and demonstrate how children's views contribute to decisions.

Strengthening children's participation, therefore, requires a shift from measuring participation by the existence of mechanisms towards assessing participation through its outcomes, inclusiveness and impact. Only then can participation move beyond consultation and become a visible, trusted and integral component of democratic governance.

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