



KEKI
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

The participation circle

A participation process with children and young people: how so?

**Through 21 reflection questions, you will map out the contours for
a participation process.**

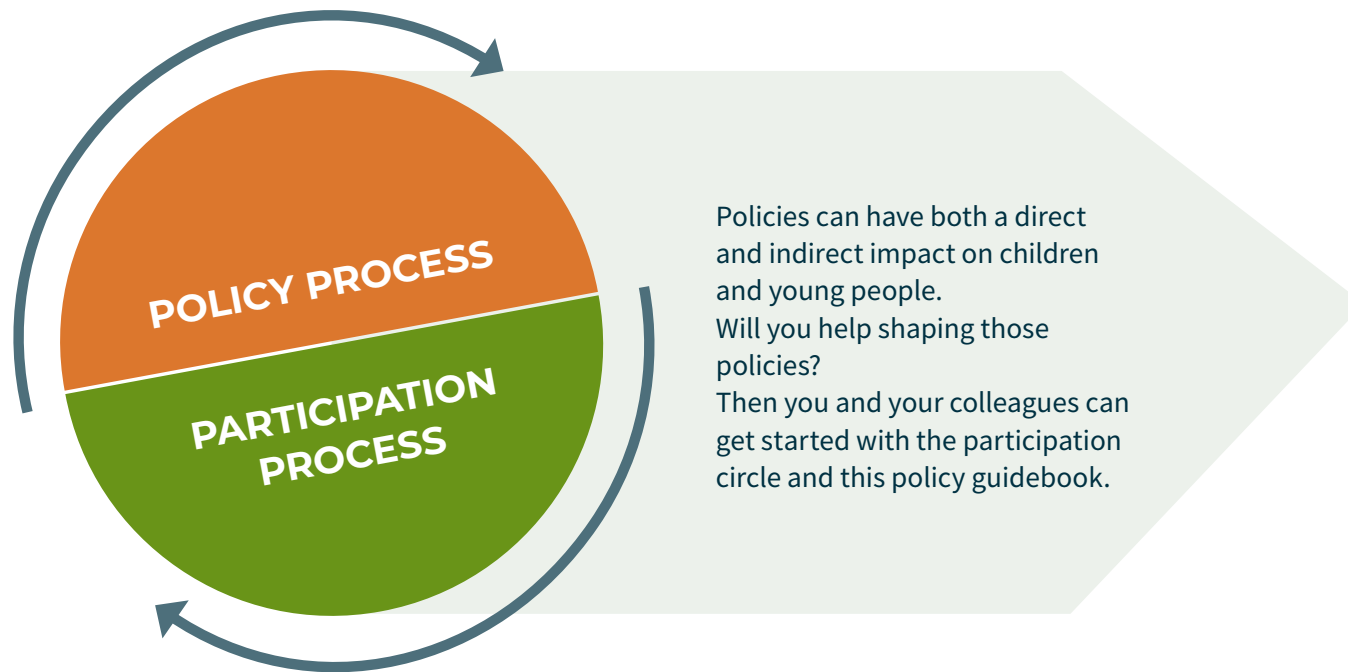
Policy participation?

Policy participation means involving children and young people ...

BEFORE... a decision is made you sincerely involve with their input.

SO THAT... a decision is made in line with what children and young people themselves care about.

AFTER... a decision was made, with the possibility to question the choices made and to start over.



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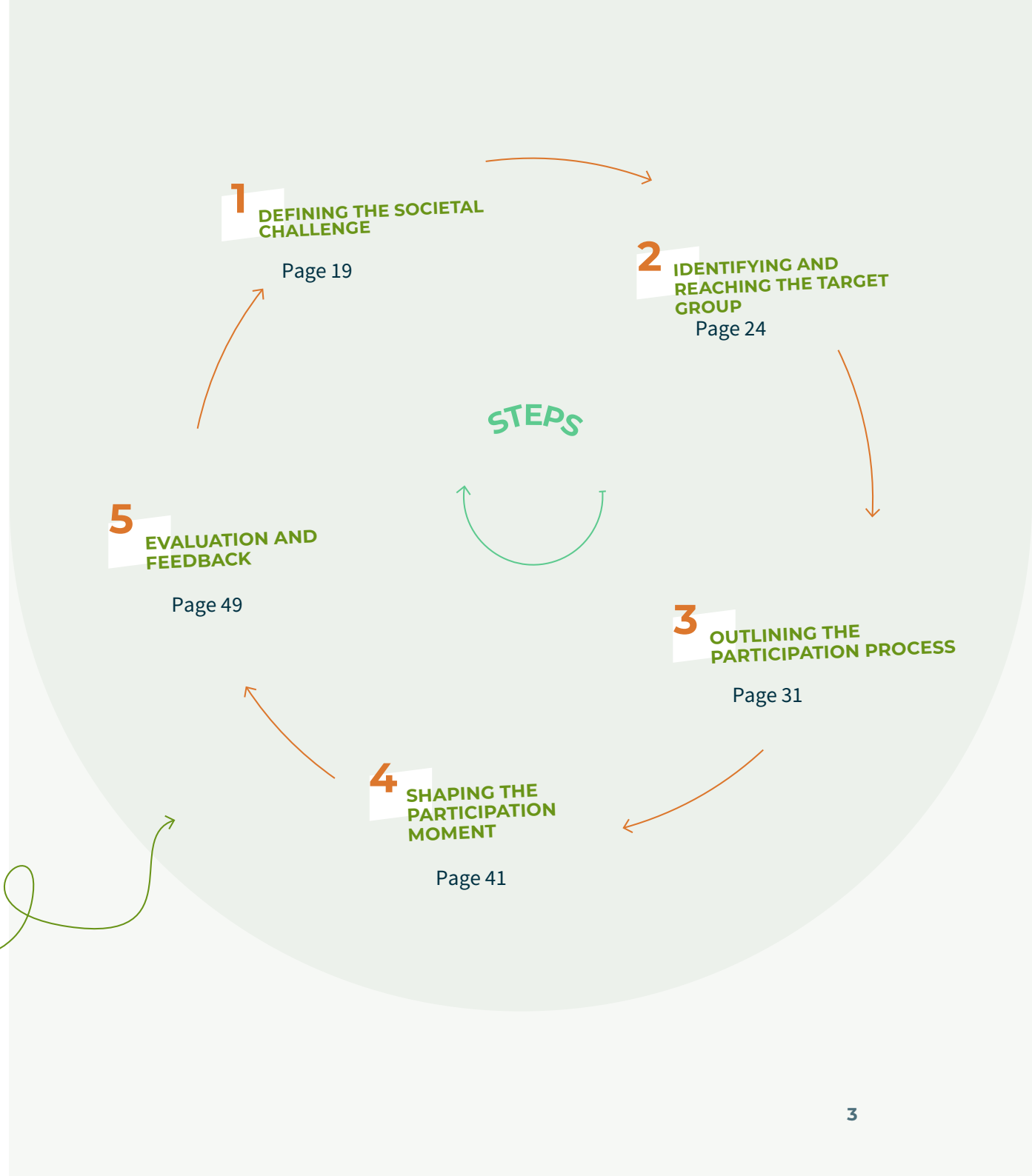
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Why design a participation process with children and young people?

Children and young people also have a voice

About 1 in 6 people in Europe are under the age of 18. This is a large group, which is not being heard via traditional elections. Adults already very often feel that they are not involved in policy decisions and that their voices are barely heard. For minors, this is even more the case.

Policy participation of children and young people is a way of shaping a democracy that takes into account all citizens.

In society, it is mainly (certain) adults who occupy a position of power: they usually take the (important) decisions, are allowed to vote during elections ... Children and young people have fewer opportunities to express their opinions. **By involving children and young people in policy processes, you challenge existing power relations and redistribute power.**

It results in stronger policies

Participation of children and young people ...

- provides insight into the world of children and young people: they are the experts of their own world.
- allows for more out-of-the-box thinking: children and young people often think beyond the potential difficulties that adults are very quick to perceive.

In participatory processes, children and young people often consider the needs and wishes of other target groups, and not just their own interests. Participation can likewise ensure that **the final decision is also more supported because ...**

- children and young people have a better understanding of the reasoning behind the decision.
- the decision is more in line with the experiences, needs, and interests of children and young people.



Participation is a children's right

Several provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child together make up the right to participation.

The cornerstone of the right to participation is **article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child:**

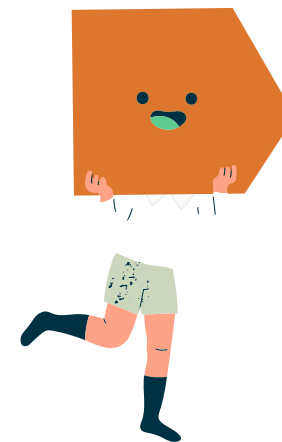
“States Parties shall ensure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

The following elements about the right to be heard are important to remember:

- It applies to every child that is able to form their own opinion.
- It applies in all matters that have an impact on the child.
- It involves not merely listening to their views but giving them appropriate weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity.

The following provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child also relate to participation:

- the right to freedom of expression (article 13)
- the freedom of thought (article 14)
- the freedom of association (article 15)
- and the right to (appropriate) information (article 17)



The right to participation is also found in the Belgian Constitution:

“Every child has the right to express their opinion in all matters affecting them; such opinion shall be taken into account in accordance with his or her age and discernment.” (Article 22bis Constitution)

Children’s rights are the common thread throughout this guidebook. As a policymaker, you fulfil your **legal obligation** to involve children and young people in decisions that affect them (Article 12, Children’s Rights Convention). In addition, you can also fulfil your **societal responsibility**: to empower all children and young people in society.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

Regularly reflect on the potential impact of your policies on children and young people. And consider whether you know enough about the perspectives of children and young people on this challenge.

Do: include the perspective of children and young people into policy processes with an (in)direct impact on children and young people

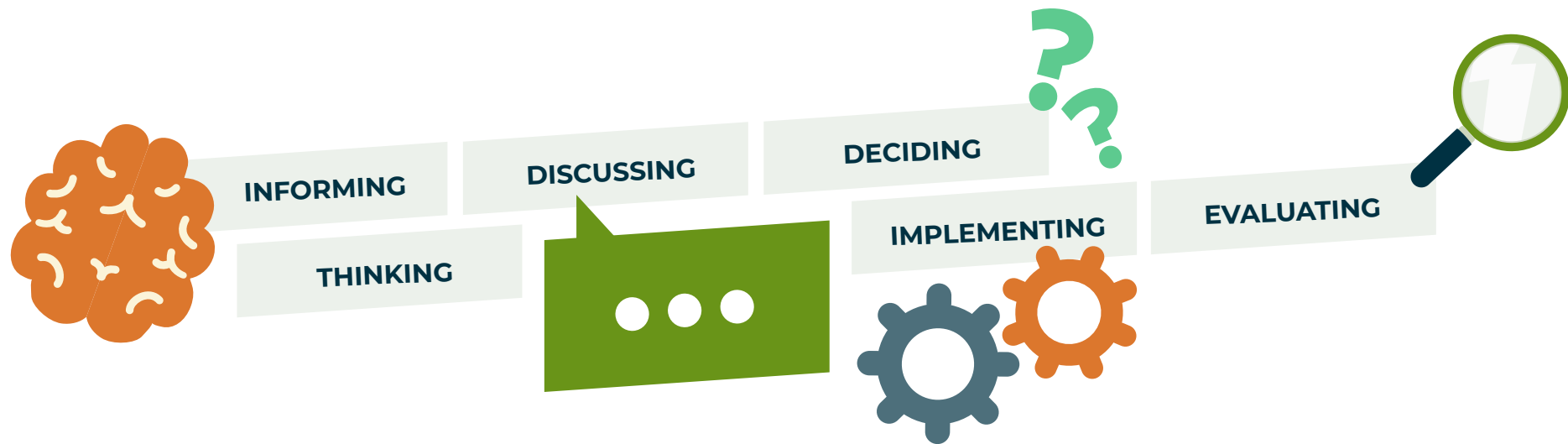
Don’t: always directly interact with children and young people yourself

It may also involve:

- Indirect participation of children and young people, e.g. through organisations working with children and young people.
- Consulting research on the societal challenge, the (potential) impact on children and young people, as well as their perspectives on this.
- Consulting outcomes of previous participation processes.
- Self-organising or outsourcing an in-depth study on children and young people’s perspectives on a societal challenge.
- ...

Don't: always leave the decision entirely in the hands of children and young people.

Children and young people may take up different roles:

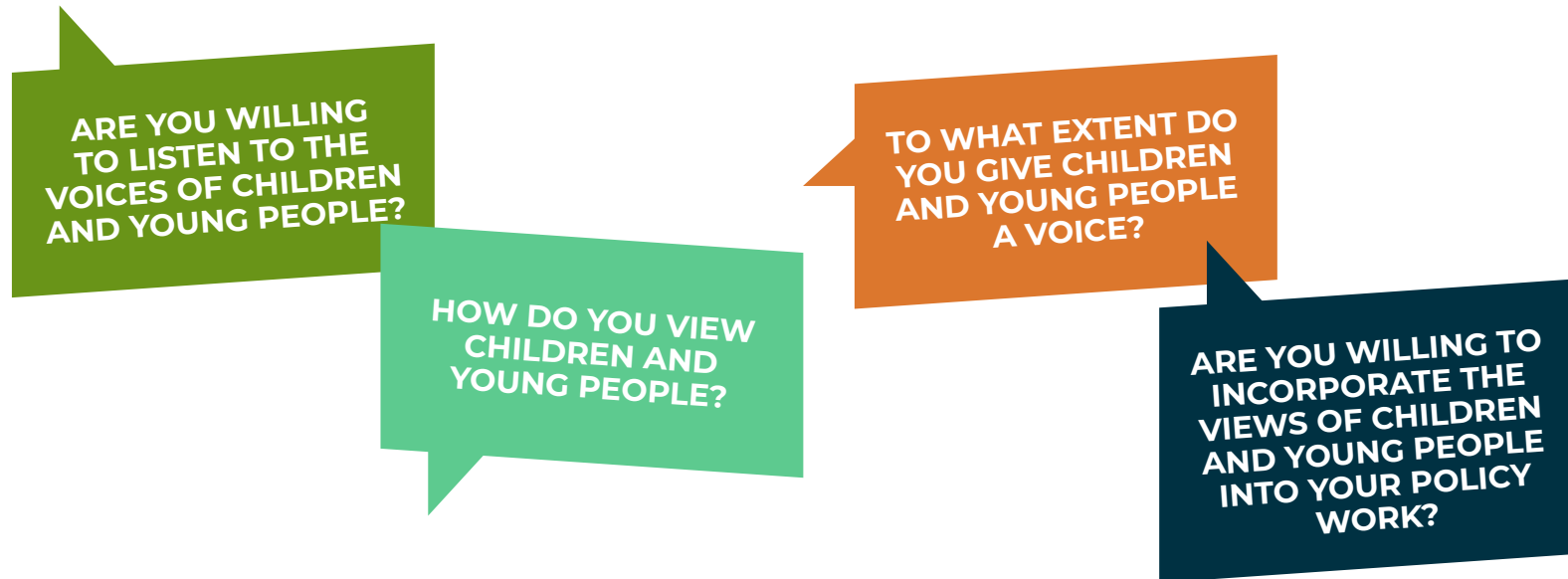


Summary:

By focusing on policy participation of children and young people, you yourself are already committed to realising their right to participation. To realise this right to participation in a child-friendly manner, it is important to take into account their rights and some conditions for good and meaningful participation. These rights and conditions are incorporated in the different steps of the participation circle. It is important to pay special attention to these conditions when planning and implementing the participation process.

Participation as an open process

A participation process requires time, space, and flexibility. And, in particular, **daring to be open to the opinions of citizens including children and young people**. It is a challenging process in which exploration and reflection are key.



This guidebook will help you draw the outlines for a participation process. Depending on the choices you make, some will require more time or can simply be skipped.

It is an exercise in unlearning what we think we know, and instead being open to allow the perspectives of children and young people to come into their own.

Getting started with the participation circle

The participation circle guides you through the design, implementation, or evaluation of a participation process with children and young people. **It pays attention to both the practical decisions and the preconditions for a successful process!** Some questions will only be relevant if you opt for direct participation.

For support, you may use the **form**. Do you prefer to go through some questions in a different order? That is of course also possible.

Start using this guidebook before embarking on a policy process. This will give you the best chance of a successful participatory process. Has the process already started? We then still encourage you to make use of the reflection questions. It can always provide insights and make you change course.



Tips on getting started

Consider the participation circle as a team.

Who you bring to the table will be different for each policy process.

Here are some people who might be interesting to design the process with:

- The policy staff members working on the issue.
- A colleague who is already experienced in policy participation.
- A communications officer.
- Children and young people themselves, or their representative organisations.



Allow sufficient time

Put the participation circle as a full item on the agenda or, better still, hold a focus meeting. The duration will vary depending on your previous experience and the societal challenge. Plan a 1.5-hour kick-off meeting and discuss as a team how you will plan the rest of the process.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

At the basis of any participation process lies a shared language, vision, and expectation. These form the building blocks of the process.

The building blocks will help you gain more insight into ...

- how you and your organisation view policy participation of children and young people.
- the reasons why you want to include the voices of children and young people in your policy work.
- the rights of children and young people in a participatory process.
- the skills needed to include the perspective of children and young people in your policy work.
- equal participation of children and young people regarding power relations.

By identifying and sharing these issues as a team, you create the foundations for an effective participation process.



Which elements of a basic participatory attitude have you developed and which would you like to develop further?

How do you implement your participation process in a child-friendly manner?

Why do you involve children and young people?

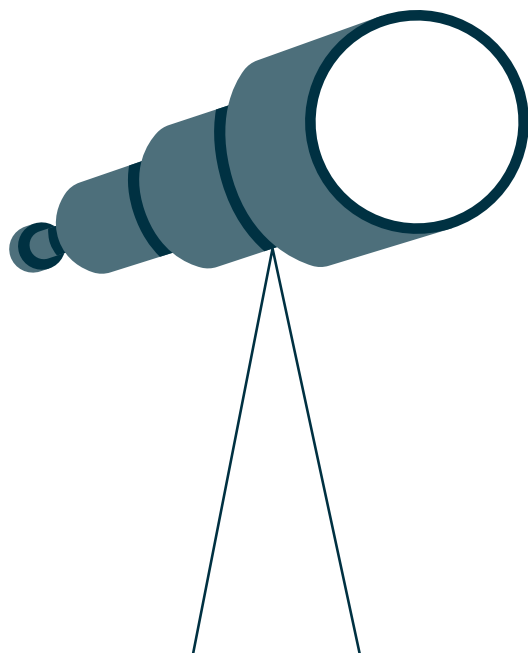
How do you ensure that all children and young people can participate equally?

What do you and your team understand by participation of children and young people?

Building block 1: What do you and your team understand by participation of children and young people?

- How do you define participation?
- Which colleagues have knowledge and experience of child and teenager participation?
- To what extent is there support for participation?

Before you start your participation process, it is good to reflect on **your understanding of participation of children and young people**. What are you prepared to do to include the perspective of children and young people in your policy work? In addition, not only your own attitude and vision are important. Those of **your colleagues** are equally important. A lot depends on the possibilities within your organisation to include the perspective of children and young people.



Discussing these matters will result in a shared language and clear expectations.

Which elements of a basic participatory attitude have you developed and which would you like to develop further?

How do you implement your participation process in a child-friendly manner?

Why do you involve children and young people?

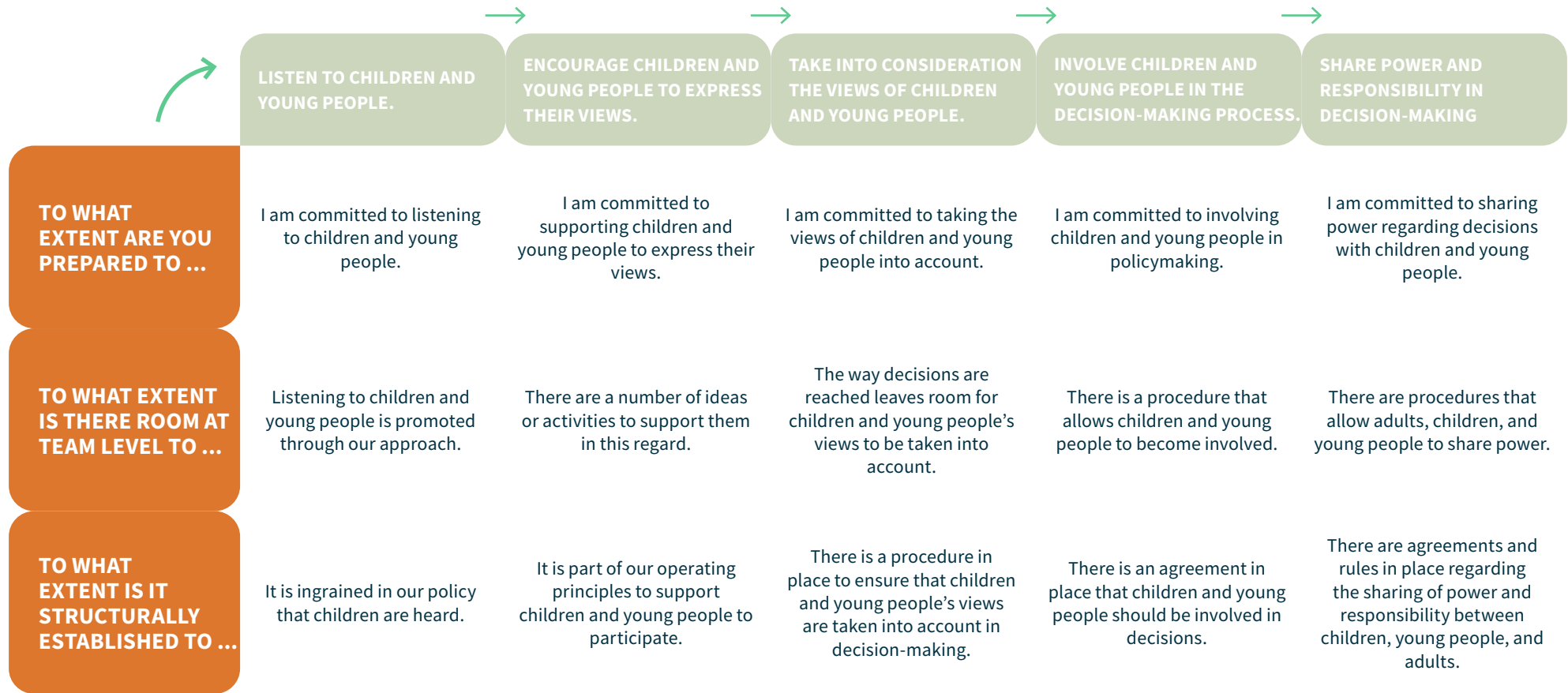
How do you ensure that all children and young people can participate equally?

What do you and your team understand by participation of children and young people?



Exchange:

- Where are you and your team situated? Is there a difference?
- Where do you want to find yourselves?
- What needs to change to structurally embed more opportunities?



(Based on the Schier model)

It is not imperative to always take yet another step further. Look at your goals and accordingly make targeted choices about the role of children and young people.

Building block 2: Why do you involve children and young people?

- **Why do children and young people want to be involved? Are these the same reasons?**

It is important to pursue different goals with your participation process. There are several types:

- **Legal goals:** comply with legal obligations, realise children's rights in practice, empower children to exercise and enforce their rights if necessary.
- **Policy goals:** allow signals received and/or input gathered to influence the policy process, shaping a democracy in which citizens participate in policy.
- **Substantive goals:** find out what is going on in the lives of children and young people and thus reach better decisions.
- **Pedagogical goals:** empower children and young people, train them in certain competences (reflecting on relevant topics, forming an opinion, listening to others, and being open to everyone's views), and teach children and young people about their right to participation and other children's rights.
- **Political goals:** bolster involvement of children and young people to meet political expectations.

When you are driven solely by political motivation, this constitutes sham participation. Children and young people then serve as decoration of your policies, without actually having a say. When you organise your participation process solely for pedagogical purposes, it is better to talk about educational projects instead of policy participation.



Which elements of a basic participatory attitude have you developed and which would you like to develop further?

How do you implement your participation process in a child-friendly manner?

Why do you involve children and young people?

How do you ensure that all children and young people can participate equally?

What do you and your team understand by participation of children and young people?

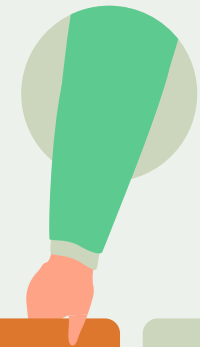
Building block 3: Which elements of a basic participatory attitude have you developed, and which ones would you like to develop further?

- What do you consider to be elements of a basic participatory attitude?
- What are your strengths? What are your strengths as a team?
- In which ways would you like to grow? And your team?

How you treat children and young people determines the extent to which they can realise their right to participation. A participatory and facilitative attitude is essential. This is especially important if you involve directly with children and young people yourself. But even if you manage and monitor the participation process from a distance, your attitude determines much of the way you view participation as well as (the value of) children and young people input.

Some characteristics of a basic participatory attitude:

- You reflect on your own attitude and vision, and you are willing to learn from what children and young people can contribute.
- You respect the opinions of children and young people and take them seriously.
- You can create a confidential environment in which children and young people feel safe to participate in the activity.
- You pay attention to the interaction between children and young people.
- You don't lead the questioning.



Which elements of a basic participatory attitude have you developed and which would you like to develop further?

How do you implement your participation process in a child-friendly manner?

Why do you involve children and young people?

How do you ensure that all children and young people can participate equally?

What do you and your team understand by participation of children and young people?

Building block 4: How do you ensure that all children and young people can participate on an equal footing?

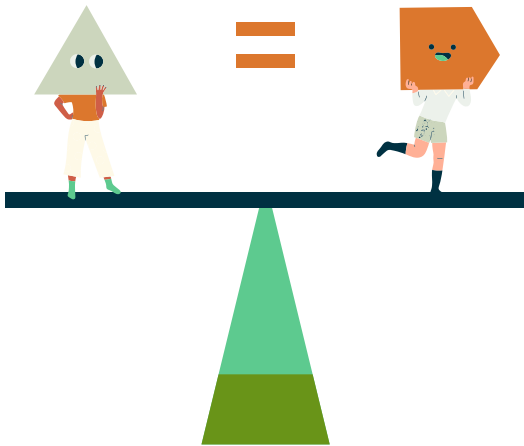
- How do you ensure that all children feel safe to participate?
- How will you respond to group dynamics?

Power relations are about how groups or individuals relate to each other: stronger, weaker, or balanced? Power relations exist between groups (e.g. adults vs children and young people) but also between individuals within the same group:

- In a participation process, an adult often sets the framework and thus has more influence on the final outcome than children and young people.
- Within a group, there may be an imbalance between, for example, more and less self-confident and empowered children and young people, children with or without a culture of participation at home, at school, or in their spare time ...

Equal participation calls attention to these relationships, as they make some children and young people especially vulnerable.

Children and young people in vulnerable situations are often unable or less able to realise their participation rights. It is important to address this. Attention to power relations is needed in different aspects of the participation process. Just think about the choice of work methods, the person guiding the process, the role you assign to children and young people ...



Which elements of a basic participatory attitude have you developed and which would you like to develop further?

How do you implement your participation process in a child-friendly manner?

Why do you involve children and young people?

How do you ensure that all children and young people can participate equally?

What do you and your team understand by participation of children and young people?

Building block 5: How do you implement your participation process in a child-friendly way?

- How do children and young people view the following conditions and when is a condition fulfilled for them?
- How do you involve participating children and young people in fulfilling these conditions?

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child clarified in its General Comment No 12 what conditions must be complied with to implement the right to participation in a child-friendly manner.

- Be **transparent** and **inform children and young people** about their right to participate, how they can participate, the aim, and potential impact of the participation process.
- Ensure that participation in the process remains **voluntary**. Children and young people are not obliged to participate. Allow children and young people to opt out of the process.
- Treat children and young people's views **respectfully** and make room for their own ideas and activities.
- Involve children and young people in **issues relevant to their lives** where they can draw on their own knowledge, skills and competences. Give children and young people space to decide for themselves What issues are relevant and important to them.
- Provide a **child-friendly** environment and work methods adapted to children's abilities.
- Ensure an **inclusive** participation process that welcomes children and young people from diverse life circumstances, without discrimination and in a culturally sensitive manner.
- Provide adequate **training** for the facilitators of the participation process, as well as for the children and young people themselves.
- Take measures to ensure a **safe situation**.
- **Relay back** to the children and young people on how their views have been taken into account.

Which elements of a basic participatory attitude have you developed and which would you like to develop further?

How do you implement your participation process in a child-friendly manner?

Why do you involve children and young people?

How do you ensure that all children and young people can participate equally?

What do you and your team understand by participation of children and young people?

In addition, the right to privacy is also important (Article 16 CRC): for example, one may not disclose data on participating children and young people without their own consent or that of their parent or guardian.

These rights and conditions are incorporated in the different steps of the participation circle. It is important that these conditions receive special attention when planning and implementing the participation process.

STEP 1
DEFINING THE SOCIETAL CHALLENGE

- How do you define the societal challenge?
- What topic of focus do you choose for your participation process?

2
IDENTIFYING AND REACHING THE TARGET GROUP

3
OUTLINING THE PARTICIPATION PROCESS

4
SHAPING THE PARTICIPATION MOMENT

5
EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

STEPS

How do you define the societal challenge?

- **How will you include children and young people's perspectives when formulating the problem statement?**
- **How can you (structurally) be more attentive to what resonates with children and young people?**

The right to participation is not limited to informing and involving children and young people in devising solutions to a problem. **Children and young people can also contribute to the definition of the societal challenge.** There are several ways to define societal challenges:

- **Top down:** as a policy officer, you decide What social challenge you want to work on.
- **Bottom up:** you start from an open attitude and from the ground up.

Bottom-up participation can come about in different ways. Children and young people can self-organise and send their own signals towards policy and society. The school climate strikes are a well-known example.

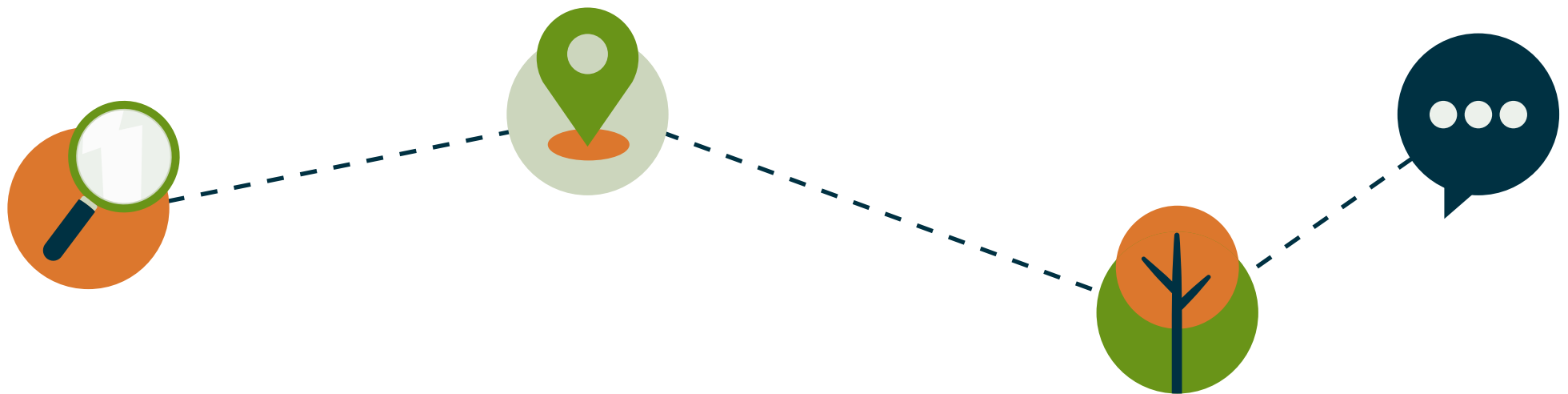
A bottom-up approaches offers some advantages:

- It reveals the interests of children and young people in themes that are not usually linked to them. When people think about children and young people participation there is often a focus on education and leisure time, but they are also often interested in less obvious themes, such as mobility, discrimination, and poverty.
- Children and young people are experts about their own life situations, and are therefore best placed to indicate what is important to them.
- It increases the involvement of children and young people in the later process.

Working bottom-up, however, does not mean that policymakers take a passive role and wait for signals from children and young people. Children and young people need to know that they can voice their opinions, even if they are not explicitly asked to do so, and that they can approach the policy officers with their opinions. In addition, it is necessary to think about how to involve with these signals in your policy work. There are of course also hybrid forms. For instance, children and young people can give their input on a top-down policy choice, e.g. to clarify the policy question. In this way, the challenge can be made more concrete.

Various methods exist for delineating a topic while involving different target groups. We list a few that can be used to draw up a needs analysis. You then obtain an overview of themes and challenges that are (in)directly of interest to children and young people, and that require the participation of children and young people.

- **Experience survey:** Experience surveys provide insight into how children and young people experience their life situations. It shows how they view and give meaning to the world in their own way. To map out what children and young people find important, you can set up a survey or delve into existing ones. Knowledge institutions, colleges, and universities harbour this type of expertise.
- **Location visit:** You can find out what interests children and young people by visiting grassroots organisations. Practitioners often know where the bottlenecks are.
- **Environmental analysis:** If you want to question children and young people about a policy theme, for example the functioning of the city or the spatial environment, you could first use an environment analysis to find out what already exists in that field and how the current space is experienced. For example, if you want to start a participation project on the design of a public square, an environmental analysis is necessary to study the current infrastructure.
- Set up an **advisory group** where children and young people as co-researchers help define the societal challenge from the get-go. You can organise this in different ways. Swansea University developed [a guidebook](#) suggesting how to approach child rights research with children and young people.



Many children and young people do not know where to raise their policy concerns, or are unaware that their voice is also important. It is critical to create a space for this. Establish a way to structurally capture such signals in your work flow.

What content focus do you choose for your participation process?

- What is the impact of the societal challenge on children and young people?
- What information is available on the perspective of children and young people?
- Does this information apply to all children and young people?
- Does the theme tie in with the life situations of children and young people?
- In what way will you work with the input of children and young people in your further policy process?



A well-defined topic that connects with the life and world of children and young people is essential for a good participation process..

A policy process can be abstract or complex. It is not feasible or useful to involve children and young people in every aspect of the policy process. Define the topic of your participation process clearly. On which issues do you already know the perspective of children and young people, and which questions are still open? On which topics or sub-questions does participation offer the greatest added value?

To ensure that policies are responsive to the needs of children and young people, it is important at this stage to first assess the impact of the societal challenge on children and young people. Even issues that are not often directly linked to children and young people can have an impact on them. What can you learn about this from statistics, research, and policy reports?

It is also important to find out whether information is already available on the perspective of children and young people, for instance from previous participation processes. Additionally, think about how you are going to incorporate the input into your policy process. What do you need in order to prepare, determine, or implement your policy? Will the input be incorporated into regulations or other concrete actions? Concrete change at the policy level is not always possible. Sometimes impact also means:

- confirming an existing insight;
- obtaining a new insight;
- being inspired;
- broadening your outlook;
- drawing attention to a particular experience of children and youth.

Do not keep asking children and young people about the same topic, this increases **participation fatigue**.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 12:

“**Relevant:** the issues on which children have the right to express their views must be of real relevance to their lives and enable them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities. In addition, space needs to be created to enable children to highlight and address the issues they themselves identify as relevant and important.”



Tips

Some scientific research on children and young people in Europe can be found here:

- [YouthWiki](#): Overview of national youth policy across eight key areas of action: education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, health and well-being, participation, volunteering, social inclusion, youth and the world, as well as creativity and culture.
- [Eurydice](#): Comparative reports on specific topics, indicators and statistics, news and articles on education systems in Europe.



STEP 2
IDENTIFYING AND REACHING THE TARGET GROUP

- Who is (in)directly affected by the police?
- Which children and young people are you engaging?
- How do you ensure that children and young people in socially vulnerable situations are involved?
- How do you convince children and young people to participate?

3
OUTLINING THE PARTICIPATION PROCESS

STEPS

1
DEFINING THE SOCIETAL CHALLENGE

4
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5
EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

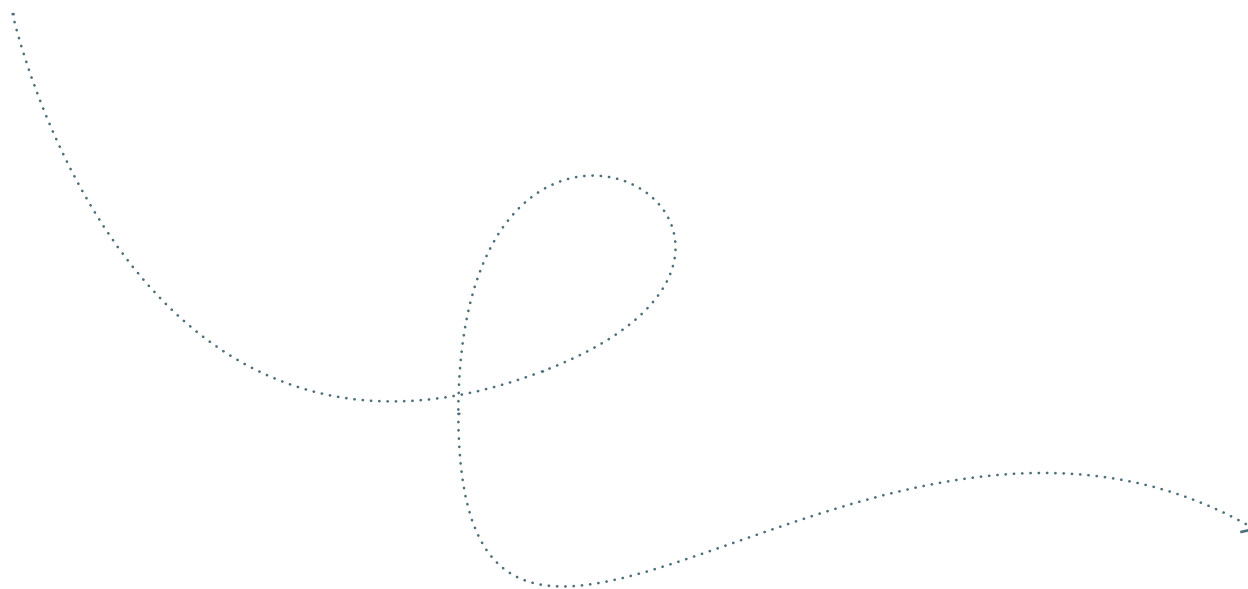
Who is (in)directly affected by the policy?

- Who has an interest in the policy?
- What information is available about the interest groups?
- Who do you want to involve in your participation process?

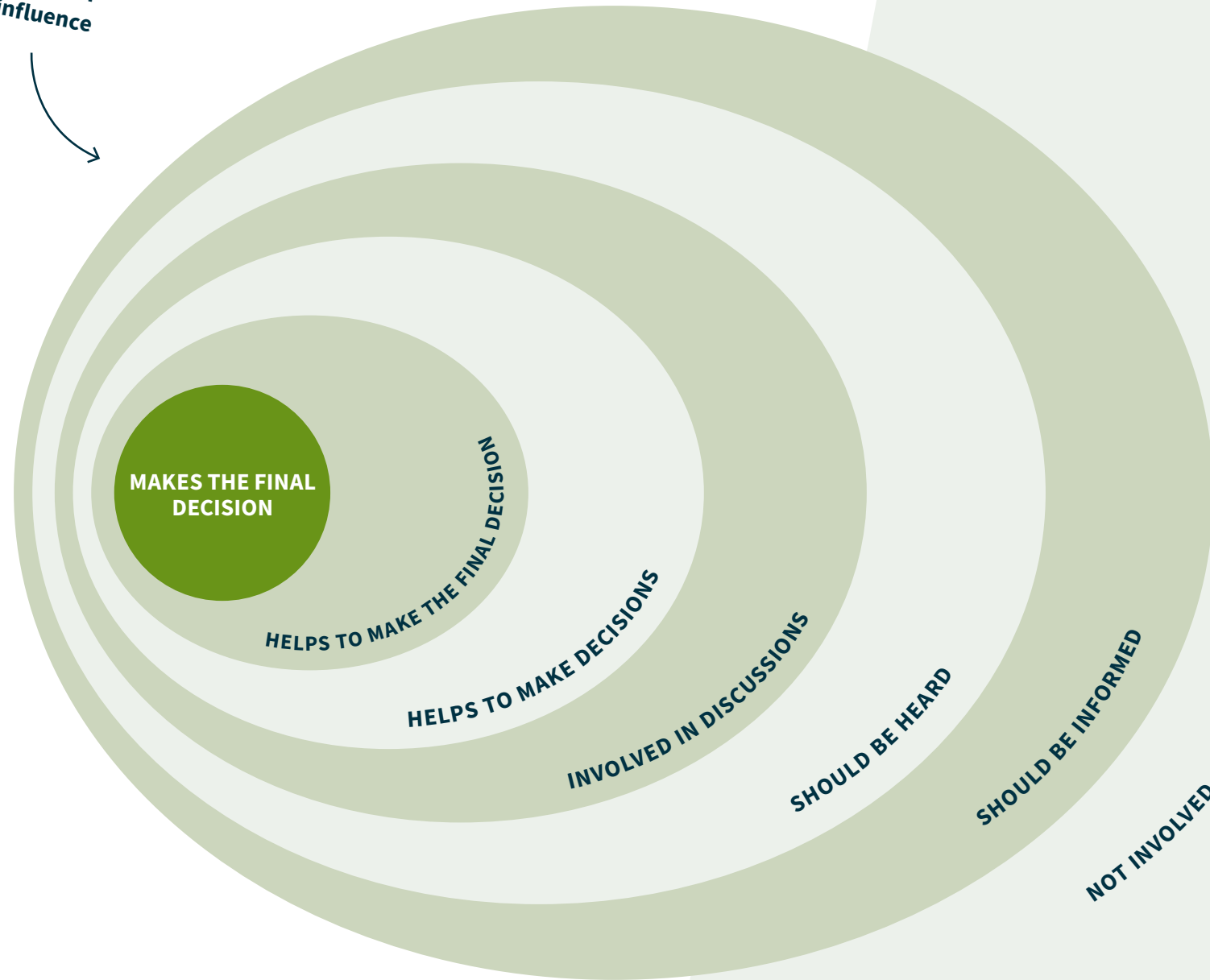
Looking through a children's rights lens sharpens your focus on children and young people as a specific (target) group. It is a very diverse group. Although we focus on children and young people in this guidebook, we do not want to lose sight of other groups in society. All relevant stakeholders can be involved in the process. **Bringing together different perspectives leads to stronger policies.**

Children and young people are often open to engaging directly with other groups of citizens. They also want to know how others think about issues that concern everyone. Enabling such involvements ensures greater support and a stronger anchoring of children's rights within society.

Check who is (in)directly affected by the policy. Who has an interest in the process? Compile a stakeholder list. You can use the **'circles of influence' methodology**. It is a simple method to identify stakeholders and determine their level of involvement.



Circles of influence



Draw several circles and individually write down on post-its the people or groups directly or indirectly affected by your policy. Then think about whether this person or group should be involved, informed, heard, etc. and stick the post-it where you think it belongs. Then, as a group, check whether everyone has placed the same person or group of people in the same circle. Exchange.

Which children and young people do you involve?

- **With which subgroup of children and young people do you want to work?**
- **Are there organisations that represent their interests? Do you involve them?**
- **Do you involve with the children and young people themselves? Do you involve an existing group or form a new one?**
- **What is the required knowledge and experience of the target group (policy process experience, communication skills, level of education ...)?**

You may decide to directly involve children and young people in your participation process, to involve their representatives, or a combination of both.

Here are some questions that can help you decide whether to involve children and young people or their representatives:

**WHAT IS THE AVAILABLE
TIME AND SPACE?**

**DO THE TOPIC AND
THE PARTICIPATION
PROCESS MATCH THE LIFE
SITUATIONS, KNOWLEDGE,
AND SKILLS OF CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE?**

**WERE CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE INVOLVED BEFORE?
INVOLVE THEM ONLY WHEN
YOU HAVE NEW QUESTIONS,
SO THAT THERE IS NO RISK
OF PARTICIPATION FATIGUE.**

**ARE THERE ORGANISATIONS
WORKING - WITH CHILDREN
OR YOUNG PEOPLE - ON
YOUR SOCIETAL CHALLENGE?**

Do you work with child and youth representatives?

- Verify that they are actually connected to children and young people from the target group and that they adequately represent their views.

Do you involve directly with children and young people? Then refine the specifics:

- With which subgroup of children and young people, if any, do you want to work?
- Does your participation process require a certain background, age, interest, skillset, knowledge, environment ...?
- Want to bring together a new group of children and young people?
- Or would you like to work with an existing group (class group, youth group, sports club ...)?
 - HOW DO YOU ARRANGE FOR THE MOST INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE GROUP POSSIBLE?
 - WHAT KIND OF GROUP IS MOST COMPATIBLE WITH YOUR PARTICIPATION PROCESS?
 - CAN PARTICIPATING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES WHETHER TO PARTICIPATE? PUT DIFFERENTLY: DOES PARTICIPATION REMAIN VOLUNTARY?

A small group may be sufficient for a successful participation process. Representativeness is not a must. The most important thing is to effectively involve the target groups you want to reach. Make sure all those children and young people are sufficiently heard. Be aware of the diversity in society. Every single voice represents only a limited group of fellow citizens.

How do you ensure that children and young people in socially vulnerable situations also become involved?

- Which children and young people are heard most often? Why is that?
- Which children and young people are not heard (enough)? Why is that?
- Will you include the latter group(s) in your participation process? How will you do that?

Children and young people growing up in socially vulnerable situations are more likely to encounter barriers to realising their children's rights. This 'vulnerability' can be very diverse. It may be poverty, violence, a migration background, gender identity, being less empowered or linguistically competent, growing up in youth care, as a carer, or with a disability. These children and young people are also more likely to drop out of participation processes. However, it is important to include them too in these processes because their experiences can be different. Participation should avoid existing patterns of discrimination and should always be inclusive. However, do not consider children and young people in a vulnerable situation as a homogeneous group.

Depending on the topic, the situation lends itself better to exclusive or inclusive involvement of specific target groups:

- Does the topic particularly concern socially vulnerable children and young people? If so, you may opt to involve them exclusively. Tune the participation process specifically to these children and young people. Focus extra on creating trust and safety.
- Do you opt for an inclusive participation process? Take measures to ensure as equal a process as possible for all children and young people. That way, you can (in)directly contribute to eliminating or reducing certain exclusionary mechanisms.

For a participation process to succeed, children and young people must have confidence in the policy and the (external) facilitator. Because of negative experiences with exclusionary mechanisms, trust in adults is often lost. Gaining trust and creating a secure environment is therefore an important first step. This requires additional time, resources, and the right people. Working through intermediaries, youth partnerships, and non-formal meetings at e.g. bus stops or public squares can help you reduce these barriers. Various organisations and experts can support you.

When organising your participation process, also consider other possible barriers, such as:

- access needs for people with disabilities (in terms of transport, communication, entrance)
- and financial barriers (e.g. not every teenager will be able to afford the necessary travel expenses).



UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 12:

“**Inclusive:** participation must be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for marginalized children, including both girls and boys, to be involved. Children are not a homogenous group and participation needs to provide for equality of opportunity for all, without discrimination on any grounds. Programs also need to ensure that they are culturally sensitive to children from all communities.”



Tips

There exists a lot of expertise about how to involve children and young people in socially vulnerable positions.
A few interesting sources:

- [The Salto Youth Inclusion Resource Centre provides an overview of inclusion and diversity training, publications, and tools for working with children and young people from socially vulnerable situations](#)
- [The Ministry of Social Development in New Zealand shared some practical pointers for policy participation in the publication ‘Involving Children - A guide to engaging children in decision making’.](#) It includes tips on specific obstacles in participatory work with ethnic-cultural minorities, very young children, children in institutions, children from rural settings, and children with disabilities.

How do you convince children and young people to participate?



- Does your participation process match the life situation of children and young people, both in terms of topic and approach?
- How do you reach the target audience that you want to involve?
- How do you value the input and participation of children and young people?

The challenge is to reach children and young people and get them excited about participating in your participation event. Reaching children and young people with your participation question happens differently when you want to work with an existing group of children and young people than when you want to reach groups outside an organised context.

- You can reach children and young people through **organised platforms** (school, sports, youth work). This is often an easier way and requires you to get in touch with teachers, trainers, or youth workers.
- Reaching children and young people **outside these contexts** requires different strategies. Think about where your target audience gathers and the channels they use: social media, a local newspaper, television ... Consider online platforms with articles where young people find information, advice, and help on all kinds of topics.

There are definitely children and young people eager to take up your social challenge. But you do not want to reach only them. Those who are not intrinsically motivated **are also a great asset.**

You can **motivate** children and young people to participate in your participation process in various ways. Some things you can do:

- Provide a material reward, e.g. a small gift or a voucher.
- Highlight the learning opportunities.
- Highlight uniqueness.
- Create a special experience: a visit to a specific building, a meeting with a politician.
- Work out a participation moment that maximises their lifestyles.
- Make it a fun time: eating together, creative approaches, a space to build friendships.

Make it very accessible, both in time and space. Opt for a short engagement, limit it to the time you need, choose a location that is easily accessible to them, or go visit the children and young people in their own environment.

When working out the communication strategy, take into account that not everyone can read (well), that not all children and young people master their language equally well, nor that everyone has a smartphone or laptop and access to the Internet.

In child and youth participation, it is not only the children and young people themselves who need to be persuaded, but also the parents. Especially in the case of (young) children, they will need to be convinced. From a purely logistical point of view, they might, for instance, be responsible for transport to and from participation moments. Pay attention to these parents in your communication.

Children and young people could also be highly motivated to participate in your process. They may want to meet more often than the moments you have planned. On the one hand, it is important that children and young people have a direct say in how they participate. On the other hand, it is necessary to limit participation moments to what is feasible for you and your colleagues. **Agree upon when the participation process will end and what you will do together.**

STEP 3 OUTLINING THE PARTICIPATION PROCESS

- At what stage(s) of the policy process do you want to involve children and young people?
- What is the role of the children and young people involved?
- Which approach(es) do you choose for the participation process?

4 SHAPING THE PARTICIPATION MOMENT

STEPS

2 IDENTIFYING AND REACHING THE TARGET GROUP

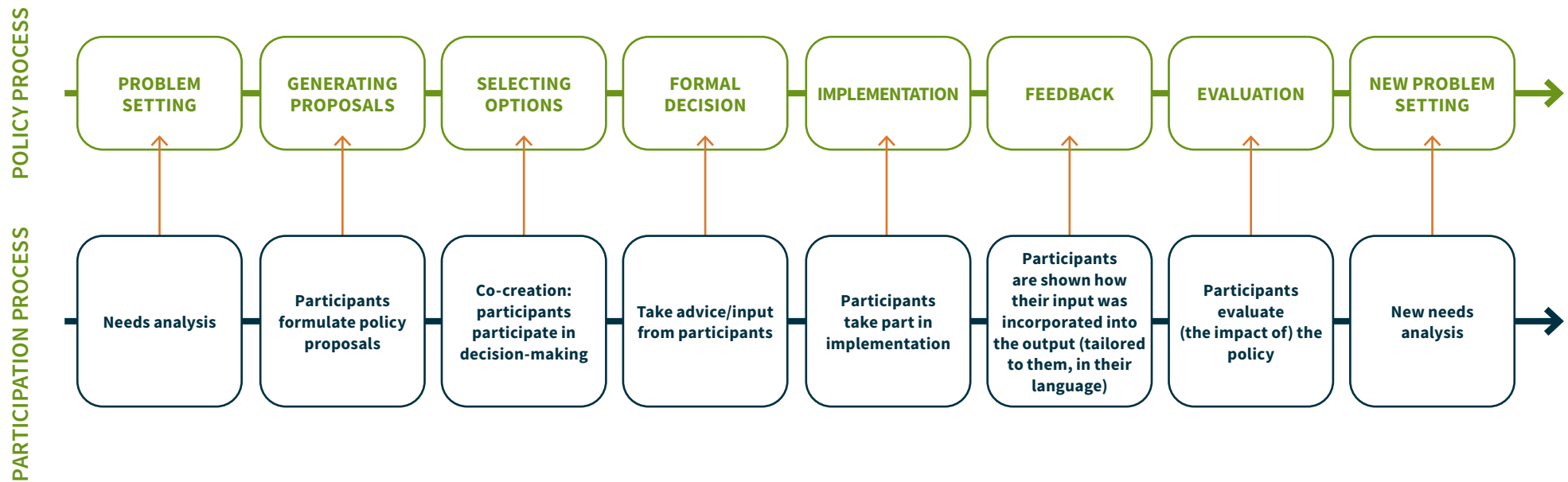
1 DEFINING THE SOCIETAL CHALLENGE

5 EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

At what stage(s) of the policy process do you want to involve children and young people?

- Of which stage(s) does your policy process consist?
- In which stage(s) do you involve children and young people? And why?

Each stage(s) lends itself to the involvement of children and young people. **It is not necessary to involve children and young people at every stage.** When children and young people are involved only after decisions have already been made and there is no more room for change, this is obviously a case of sham participation. We note that children and young people are often left out when solutions are sought, when feedback is given, and when policies are evaluated. However, children and young people can also make relevant and interesting contributions here. The two-arrow model below shows **the reciprocity at play between policy process and participation process:**



In its Opinion 1509 on policy participation of youth, the Flemish Youth Council provides policymakers with the following recommendation:
“At the beginning of every policy process, create a participation plan that involves young people in every step of the policy process.”

“ Young people are already involved in policy-making in various ways. But our conversations with young people and experts unfortunately show that this involvement often stops after an initial advisory phase. They are not allowed to contribute to the further policy process or are not given information about what their input is delivering. ”

Policy-makers of all decision-making levels should, at the start of a policy process, draw up a participation plan that describes in concrete terms how young people can participate in each phase thereof, and how and when the organisers of the process communicate with them. **Only by planning and also implementing this process can policymakers arrive at a final decision that is (more) supported by the target audience. (...)**

The Flemish government, supported by youth work, should compile a toolkit with tips, tricks, as well as concrete activities, and distribute it to local authorities and other bodies working with youth participation. Of course, a policy process is not over when the decision is made: **the contribution of young people should also be felt during the implementation.** That way, policy-makers can count on more support from young people during said implementation. Policy-makers should actively seek out young people to ask for their opinions at the different steps of the policy process. After all, they are not always aware of possible participation opportunities and the threshold to approach a policy-maker is often still very high. **Direct dialogue with young people helps to lower barriers and will increase mutual respect and understanding.** In the end, the final decision will also be much more balanced.”



What is the role of the children and young people involved?

- **Were children and young people already involved in this issue? What role were they given at the time?**
- **Which role(s) do children and young people want to take up?**
- **As a policy officer, what will you do with input from children and young people?**

Not everyone understands participation in the same way. It is important that the expectations of all stakeholders about the participation process are questioned and shared. By discussing and aligning expectations and interpretations, you reduce the risk of disappointments, negative experiences, dropouts, and so on.

A participation process is successful for you if children and young people participate in ...

- **sharing knowledge:** children and young people are well informed on the issues that concern them.
- **thinking along:** children and young people reflect about the things that concern them. They do this from within their own realm of experience.
- **discussing:** children and young people talk about their experiences and opinions, both with peers and adults.
- **decision making:** children and young people make a decision, alone, with you as a policy officer or with other interest groups.
- **implementing:** once the decision is made, children and young people are involved in its implementation.
- **evaluating:** children and young people help assess to what extent the expected objective has been achieved and how it could be improved.



The policy context, the concrete social challenge around which you will be working, and the open questions will all largely determine the role children and young people will have in the participation process. However, it is also useful to discuss the roles and expectations together with the children and young people involved. They can indicate which role they see fit, what their capabilities are, and what interests them. Adopt an open attitude and be receptive to their input. When is the process successful for you and the children and young people involved? In doing so, communicate clearly about the possibilities for making concrete changes in policy and the duration of the policy process.

Beware of sham participation. Avoid ...

- seeking the views of children and young people only after decisions have already been made.
- doing nothing with the voice of children and young people after a participatory process.
- using participation to satisfy one's own interests or because it just sounds good.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 12:

“**Respectful:** children and young people views should be treated respectfully and space should be made for their own ideas and activities.”

Which form(s) do you choose for the participation process?

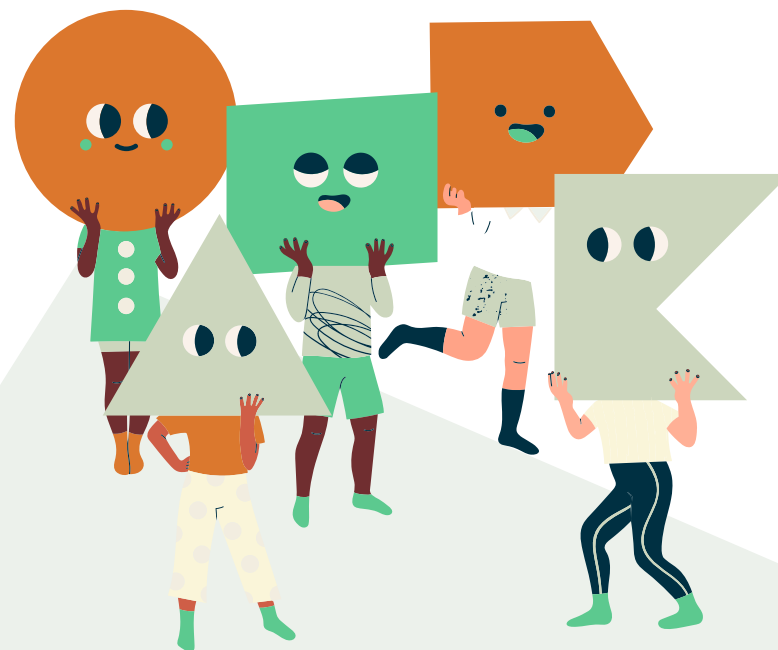
- How will you involve children and young people?
- Does the chosen form fit the life situations of children and young people?

Research indicates that there is an increased interest among young people in informal or non-conventional forms of policy participation, such as setting up and signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, 'consumer activism', etc. Find out in what ways children and young people themselves want to be involved, and see if the participation process you have in mind attracts them. From a children's rights perspective, it is important that children and young people always have the opportunity to participate, but also to not participate. The closer the connection to their own life situation, the more they can experience participation as an added value.

You may choose to ...

- organise a separate participation process with children and young people or their representatives
- involve children and young people or their representatives along with adults or other target groups in a mixed process.
- organise separate processes.

Do you organise separate participation processes for children and young people on the one hand and other target groups on the other? If so, it could be interesting to make these processes interact.



When participation moments are planned with adults, children, and young people can also participate.

In doing so, it is essential that ...

- children and young people can also bring topics onto the agenda themselves.
- their input is considered and weighed on the final decision.
- children and young people are professionally supported, e.g. by their organisation or a policy officer.
- the time and location of the meeting are taken into account: a meeting during school hours will in many cases be impossible for or deter children and young people.
- one is aware that for many children and young people this is not attractive or even possible.

To illustrate:

- For example, if a steering committee is set up with people with different expertise and interests, children and young people can also be invited to join.
- When an information event is organised for the general population around a policy process, one can ensure that child-friendly information is also offered.



Tips

Examples of forms of policy participation by children and young people:

- In 2018, the Council of Europe published a [study on innovative forms of youth participation in policy-making](#).

STEP 4 SHAPING THE MOMENT OF PARTICIPATION

- Do you plan and facilitate the participation moment yourself or do you (partially) outsource it?
- How do you inform children and young people?
- Which methodologies are you using?

5 EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

STEPS

3 OUTLINING THE PARTICIPATION PROCESS

1 DEFINING THE SOCIETAL CHALLENGE

2 IDENTIFYING AND REACHING THE TARGET GROUP

Do you plan and facilitate the participation moment yourself or do you (partially) outsource it?

- What expertise and skills do you and your colleagues possess?
- Which external supervisor might be suitable?
- Can children and young people themselves take on certain facilitating roles? E.g. the role of chairperson, reporter, ...

It is important to think carefully about who will supervise the process. In the concrete layout of the process, you will have the choice to either roll out the participation process yourself as a facilitator or to outsource it. This will depend on several factors:

- Do you have the necessary skills to manage the process?
- Do you have time for this in your policy process?
- Are resources provided to bring in an external supervisor?

Do you prefer to develop and supervise the participation moment yourself? Then consider whether you can be supported by partners. Do you outsource the entire process? Implementation by an external partner does not necessarily mean that you do not play any role. As a policy officer, you of course remain the person with final responsibility. From the start, it should be clear what exactly is expected of the participation process and the supervisor.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 12:

“**Support:** adults who facilitate participation of children and young people should have adequate preparation, skills, and training for this. Children and young people can also be involved as trainers or facilitators to promote participation and should likewise enjoy adequate training and support for this.”

When choosing an external partner, a few considerations are important:

- **Avoid facilitators with a position of (explicit) power over children and young people.** Look for neutral people to take on this role. For example, when conducting the survey in a school context, it is better not to choose the teacher as supervisor. In classroom contexts, the teacher often stands explicitly above the pupils and exercises authority.
- **What roles can children and young people take in the participation process:** can you work with a changing chairperson or can you (partially) hand over the report to the children and young people involved? How do the children and young people see this?

Even if you are not personally guiding the participation process, you can work with the facilitators to **find a role for yourself:**

- Observe the process or help with the report. This allows you to remain informed about how the process went.
- Help to inform children and young people, and answer questions that arise during the process.
- Support the supervisor in the implementation.

How do you inform children and young people?

- How do you inform children and young people about the topic?
- What information is needed for children and young people to participate?
- Who do you enlist to inform the children and young people?

Policies tend to deal with complex topics and associated jargon. Make targeted choices: What information is necessary for a child or teenager who is not familiar with the topic, to be able to participate? Whatever role or methodology you choose, clear information is the foundation of any participation process.

Inform with purpose

- Share necessary background information.
 - Take another critical look at the social challenge you want to tackle: is it necessary to further delineate it?
 - Which concepts do children and young people need to know?
 - What information about the social challenge is important?
- Provide an insight into the policy and participation process.
 - Also highlight preconditions and constraints, due to e.g. budget, political context, regulations, and timing of the process.
- Sharpen the skills of children and young people.
- Tell children and young people that everything is changing in society, and that nothing should stay as it is now. In this way, you are placing emphasis on future thinking.
- Teach them how to think from the discipline or angle that is required for tackling the policy question.

In order to inform people properly, you also need to listen. What questions do children and young people still have? Make sure that children and young people also get opportunities and space to ask their own questions.



How to approach

- Do not use academic terminology or jargon.
- Keep it simple without oversimplifying the content.
- Test with a group of children and young people who are part of your target audience whether they understand the information.
- Make it visual: use photos and videos.
- Let the responsible minister or policymaker do the talking.
- Hit the streets. For example, if the topic is spatial planning, you can experience the area together.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 12:

“Transparent and informative: sufficient information should be provided on the topic, procedures, and possible consequences of participation by children and young people, as well as regarding the right to form and express an opinion.”

Which methodologies do you use?

- **Do the methodologies match the competences of the children and young people involved?**
- **Do you also use non-linguistic methodologies?**
- **How do you account for group dynamics?**

Great news: you do not need to devise this all by yourself, since there are already numerous guidelines available! There is a lot of available expertise about methodologies, tools, and inspiring practices that can get you started. You may adapt existing methodologies to the needs of your process. Respond to the group interests, its capabilities, and its willingness. Working with children and young people requires extra flexibility. Always keep a few extra ideas behind you, jump into the situation and adapt where necessary. There is no “one-size-fits-all”. You can also ask the group how they want to get started.

Some methodologies **adapted to the policy phase** you find yourself in:

- **Facilitating a brainstorm**
 - Baking a pizza: everyone writes on a cardboard sign a situation or problem. The other children and young people write on a (paper) ingredient how they would react to that situation or how they would tackle a problem, and then place it on the pizza. At the end, everyone looks at which ingredients - with corresponding input - are on their pizza. This can be discussed in group, before the ‘ideal’ pizza is baked in the oven.
 - The tree: the children and young people start from a word, written on the trunk of the tree. They then draw four branches, on which they write associations with the first word. Each branch gets five branches, where once again associations on the word of the branch (and not of the trunk) are written. The tree can branch further, or it can bear leaves or fruit.
- **Setting priorities**
 - Diamond ranking: the children and young people have to rank nine or twelve ideas for solutions in a diamond. At the top is the idea that the child or teenager finds most interesting, important or best, and at the very bottom is the most unimportant or uninteresting idea. Have a conversation with the children and young people about why they chose this order and what they found difficult and easy about it. Next, the children and young people are going to explain their diamond ranking to each other, and try to make a joint diamond ranking based on everyone’s arguments.
- **Mapping experiences of children and young people**
 - The children and young people are given a stack of magazines in which they can look for pictures. With the pictures, they make a collage representing their experiences and expectations regarding the theme. They explain their collage to the rest of the group.

The methodologies are a means, not an end in themselves. Listen to the stories that emerge.

When choosing and elaborating the working methods, ensure equal participation of all children and young people. Not everyone can verbally express their opinions equally well, and group dynamics can also have an impact on how they dare to express their opinions.



A few tips:

Deploy sufficient icebreakers and energisers before, during, and after activities. Link them to the topic of the policy process. They immediately get the children and young people excited about the topic and can break down power dynamics. When making your choice, always consider elements such as culture, gender, physical abilities, and group dynamics:

- A comprehensive list of icebreakers and energisers can be found, among others, on the website of [Salto-Youth Support](#)
- Work in smaller groups, or divide your group into several groups.
- Divide the roles: who will take report, who will present the idea in front of the whole group, who will visualise the proposal ... By dividing roles you ensure that everyone can contribute, and that there is less competition between the children and young people involved to have their say.
- Use non-verbal forms of expression, such as drawing, building a scale model, ...
- Also provide individual forms of participation: not everything needs to be discussed in groups.
- Emphasise that not every contribution has to be perfect: inform the group that all ideas are welcome, and that they do not have to be perfect before they can be expressed.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 12:

“**Voluntary**: participation should be voluntary and there should be the possibility of withdrawal at all stages.”

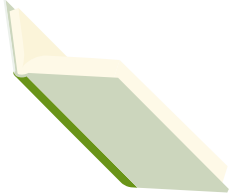
“**Respectful**: children and young people’s views should be treated respectfully, and room should be made for their own ideas and activities.”

“**Child-friendly**: the environment and methods should be tailored to their capabilities. Sufficient space and time should also be provided so that children and young people can prepare and have the opportunity and confidence to express themselves. It should also be taken into account that different children and young people have different needs in terms of support and method.”

“**Secure and mindful of risks**: adults working with children and young people have a responsibility to take measures to minimise the risks of violence, exploitation, or other negative consequences that could be associated with children and youth participation.”

More interesting sources:

- [Children's Services Network and Local Government Information Unit \(United Kingdom\)](#): tips for using social media in your participation processes
- [Lego Serious Play](#): learning to think differently with LEGO
- [Ethical Research Involving Children \(ERIC\)](#) provides insights and tips on the ethical dimension of doing participatory research with children and young people.



STEP 5 EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

- How will you evaluate the participation process with your colleagues and with the children and young people involved?
- What effect did the participation process have on your current behaviour, thinking, and attitudes? And on the children and young people involved?
- How do you channel the impact of the participation process back to the children and young people involved?
- Which opportunities and needs for a new participatory process presented themselves?

1 DEFINING THE SOCIETAL CHALLENGE

2 IDENTIFYING AND REACHING THE TARGET GROUP

3 OUTLINING THE PARTICIPATION PROCESS

4 SHAPING THE PARTICIPATION MOMENT

STEPS

How will you evaluate the participation process with your colleagues and with the children and young people involved?

- How will you evaluate the participation process with the children and young people involved?
- What went well? What did you achieve? What could have been better? What would you do differently next time and how?
- What opportunities do you see for involving children and young people in the future?
- How do you ensure that lessons learned are optimally shared within (and outside) your organisation and can be built on in the future?

At the end of a participation process, an evaluation is necessary.

- Allow enough time: a thorough evaluation ensures a smoother subsequent participation process.
- Already schedule an evaluation moment as soon as the participation process starts.
- Revisit all the steps and look back. The fill-out form can be a useful tool.
- Write down the lessons learned for future use.

Evaluation should not only take place at the end. There are already a lot of opportunities during the process. Evaluate participation moments together with the children and young people involved. Their opinion is valuable and strengthens your approach in the future. You can use a questionnaire, on paper or digitally, but there are also many creative and oral ways. In evaluation methods, also leave room for children and young people who do not wish to answer or do not know the answer. Here as well, there are power relations at play can make it difficult for children and young people to express their opinions.



Evaluation is necessary, but not sufficient.

What will you do with the conclusions of your evaluation? There is something to learn from every experience, even if the participation process did not go as you expected or hoped. Use these learning experiences as a basis to be more prepared for subsequent participation processes.

Tips

Some methodologies you can use in an evaluation with your colleagues and external partner(s):



- A **SWOT analysis**: evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of a project or organisation for your strategic planning. You will find clear explanations of this methodology online.
- A **SOAR analysis**: focus on the positive aspects of a project and evaluate the strengths, ambitions, opportunities, and results of the process. You will find a clear overview of the process online.
- **Appreciative inquiry**: when evaluating, start from what works well. In this methodology, you consider four aspects: discover (what works well?), dream (which processes could work well in the future?), design (plan and prioritise the processes that would work well), and take action (implement the proposed design).
- **Forward failing**: share your experiences of failure and also learn from such experiences of others. There is always room for learning from your own or someone else's experiences of failure, since risks are part and parcel of any innovative approach.

Various methodologies exist to evaluate the participation process with the children and young people involved. Some examples:

- **Statements**: use red (disagree) and green (agree) cards and make several statements to which the group shall respond.
- **The evaluation barometer**: For each statement, the children and young people occupy a spot in the room. If they agree with the statement, they stand e.g. on the far left, if they disagree, on the far right. Talk to them about the position they have taken.
- **The tree trunk**: Everyone is given a drawing of a tree trunk. The aim is for the children and young people to draw a tree that represents their feelings about the past day.
- **Litter bag, suitcase, and treasure chest**: all children and young people write three things on pieces of paper. On the paper for the litter bag, they write what was disappointing and they want to forget as soon as possible. On the piece of paper for the suitcase, they write something they learned during the participation moment and will take with them. On the piece of paper in front of the treasure chest, they write something they liked.

What effect did the participation process have on your current behaviour, thinking, and attitude? And on the children and young people involved?

- What has changed in your behaviour, thinking, and attitude thanks to the participation process?
- What has changed in the behaviour, thinking, and attitudes of the children and young people involved thanks to the participation process? How do you discuss this with them?
- What do you want to further improve? What coaching, support, or training can help?

By reflecting on the impact of the project on your behaviour, thinking, and attitude, you are sometimes confirmed in what you were already doing or sometimes notice that small changes have happened, of which you are not always aware. Describe the effects on your behaviour, thinking, and attitudes or that of the children and young people involved that you experience after the process.

How do you feed back the impact of the participation process to the children and young people involved?

- How will you communicate what happened with the input of the children and young people, and what the impact of the participation process was?
- Do you have any insights into how the children and young people involved want to be kept informed? How will you survey this?
- How will you communicate about the part of their input that was not considered or only partially considered?
- When and how will you provide interim feedback during the participation process?

Participation does not stop once the participation moment ends.

Children and young people have the right to know what happened to their input, even if it did not lead to direct change. Feedback on the results and what was or was not incorporated into policy should not be overlooked. The children and young people, like the organisers, have invested a lot in the project. They therefore expect accountability regarding what will happen with their input.

A policy that provides constant feedback is more likely to succeed in imparting a sense of appreciation to children and young people while increasing trust in policy and democracy.

Transparency can also motivate the children and young people involved to participate in future participation initiatives. You can determine in agreement with the children and young people in which way the feedback will be provided. Consider together what form of feedback on the process and policy decision is most appropriate and how you want to communicate it to the commissioner. For example, do you opt for a printed text, a photo album, a video, a presentation, or a combination of different forms?

A few tips

- Use infographics, photo reports, or video material tailored to children and young people.
- Start from strong stories and get a storyteller to work on this question.
- Create a large-scale campaign to inform all children and young people. For example, consider online platforms with articles where young people can find information, advice and help on all kinds of topics.

For children and young people who are involved in a participation process, it is not only relevant to know what was done with their input in the (relatively) short term, but also what impact this policy decision or measure had (in the long term). Ask these children and young people if they want to be kept informed about this, and in what way they would prefer this to happen. Keep in mind that a lot of time may pass after the participation process before you can share more about the long-term impact it had. Do not wait until the end of the participation process to give feedback. You may already do this about small steps and intermediate results in the process.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 12:

“With retrospective accountability: there is retrospective feedback on how children and young people’s views have been taken into account.”

Which opportunities and needs for a new participatory process are emerging?

It is to be expected that a lot of issues emerged during the participation process. Some of these directly steered your policy decisions, others you may want to explore further.

This can be the start of a new participation process. And so we have come full circle.





CHILDREN'S RIGHTS KNOWLEDGE CENTRE
WWW.KEKI.BE/EN

The participation circle was developed as part of the REFLECTOR 2.0 project for the Flemish Government:
policy participation as a catalyst for a children's rights perspective



Flanders
State of the Art