



Child Influence in Local Governments

Key lessons from a case study of three municipal partnerships in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

Authors:
Christopher Owambla
Cornel Ogutu

Summary

This policy brief is based on the key lessons derived from a case study investigating how local governments can create conditions for child influence in decision making processes. The study was conducted by Christopher Owambla and Cornel Ogutu in 2019 who looked at municipal partnerships in three countries: Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. It is hoped that the lessons that emerged can contribute to partnerships and project activities within the theme of child inclusion in local governments. The study recommends local governments taking steps to promote child participation and shift from tokenism to genuine child participation. Municipalities should also develop specific policy and legal frameworks to strengthen child participation. Child-led forums and platforms for child participation are also proposed to ensure children are in the forefront in decision making processes.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

Introduction

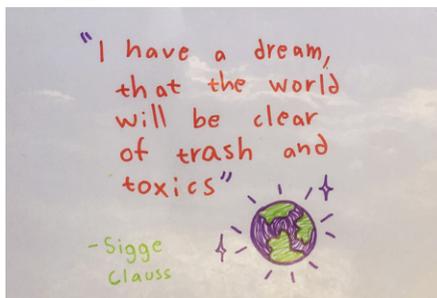
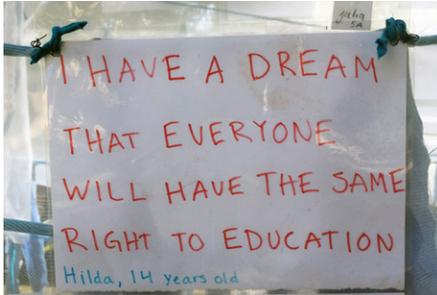
The participation of children and youth in local governments is essential to create more inclusive and sustainable societies.¹ According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the views of children and young people should be considered in any decision that is likely to affect their wellbeing. Local governments have many responsibilities that affect the well-being of children such as the provision of education, healthcare, public space, and other social services. Local governments interested in improving the well-being of children should include them in the decisions that affect their lives. Recent findings and studies done by The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) on child participation in Eastern Africa reveals that inasmuch as there is a general recognition of the right of children to participate and its usefulness for the broader protection of children's rights, the measures to ensure that the right is implemented are generally insufficient, inadequately coordinated, and not institutionalized through national structures and systems.

This case study investigated how local governments can create the conditions for child influence in decision making processes and looks into three municipal partnerships "The right to influence for children and youth" between Homabay (Kenya) and Härryda (Sweden), "Student Democracy" between Dar es Saalam (Tanzania) and Strängnäs (Sweden) and "New options for youth employment" between Mukono (Uganda) and Vimmerby (Sweden) around the theme of "child influence". This to compile support and recommendations for future partnerships.

The study revealed that there are efforts to ensure children enjoy the right to participation in line with international and regional treaty standards. The study further revealed the participation of children in a number of initiatives that promote participation which include children assemblies/councils where they are able to share their views on various issues.

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights OHCHR, "Convention on the Rights of the Child" (1989), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.

Methodology



Children's wishes for the world they envision, at an international children's conference in Nairobi, Kenya, February 2019. Photo: Malaika Mikaelsson.

The case study was developed around the conference “The Future Vessel”, organized by Globe tree² where about 100 children as well as government officials participated. Participant observation was used in the study. Data from the extensive field notes was also utilized to analyze findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the politicians and adults. In-depth interviews were conducted with youth.

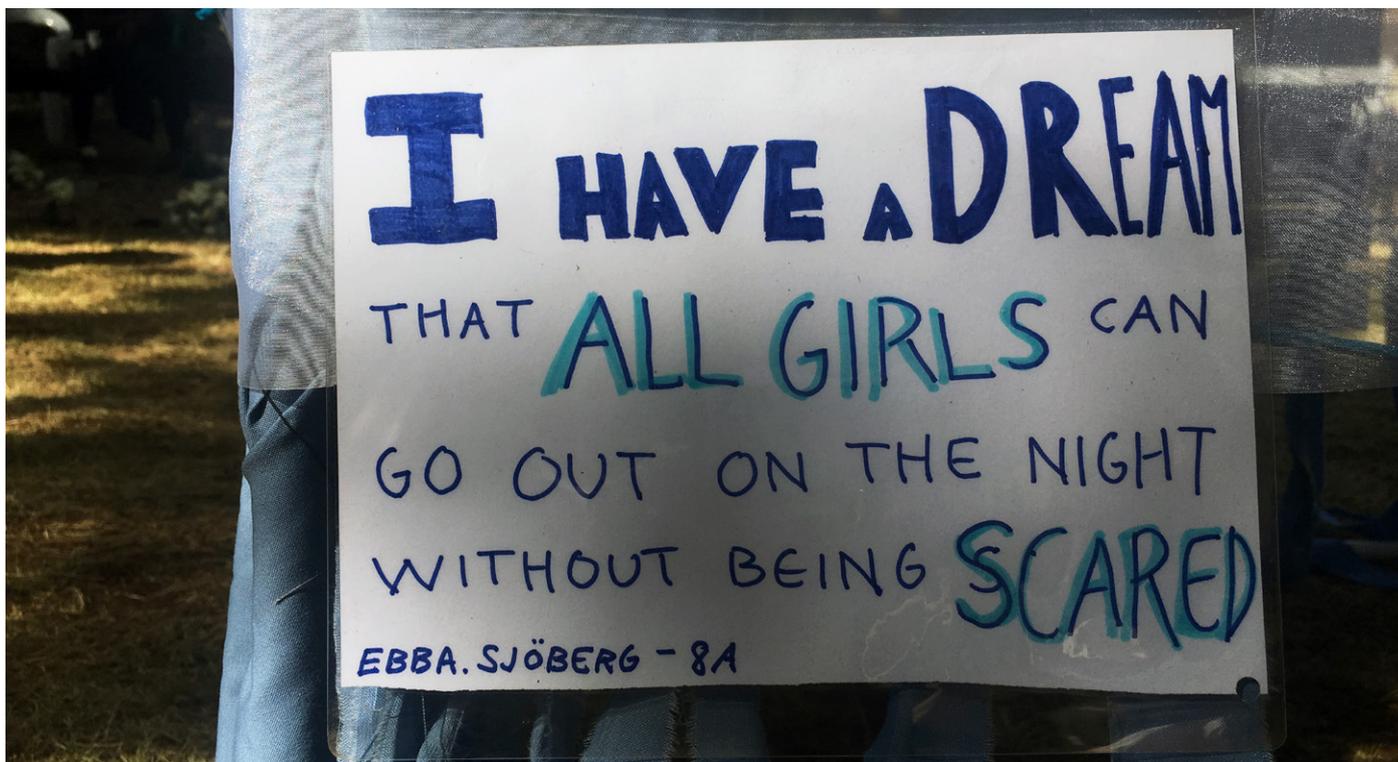
Perceived challenges for child inclusion

1. Lack of a systematic approach to child participation: While the three countries have ratified international conventions and domesticated their provisions in their national laws, the major challenge facing child participation in the region is in the systematic implementation of the right. The investigation has shown that child participation initiatives are slowly being mainstreamed, but often lack a legal or mandatory basis at the municipal level. Slow progress is further attributed to under-resourcing of implementation structures
2. Inadequate knowledge and skills in good practices: There is insufficient knowledge within municipal leadership on good practices to facilitate genuine child participation. This lack of knowledge is especially evident within local governments that are expected to play a leading role in terms of setting the standards, providing guidelines and facilitating inclusion.
3. Weak implementation structures: Local governments in many places are yet to integrate issues of child participation in their local planning agendas. All too often, participation of children tends towards the tokenistic side of the spectrum, and is then used to legitimize processes, without genuine follow up or evidence of how children's voices are reflected in decisions, policies and programme design. Children's participation is evident most frequently at formal occasions in a visible role such as acting or singing, without an indication of the processes that will reflect and act on their 'messages'.

Identified platforms and good practices for child participation

In the three countries under study, children and youth have participated in the development of various child rights governance documents – and in the development of a new Constitution in Tanzania. In Uganda, children have contributed at the community, local, and national level to the development of key policy frameworks related to their wellbeing. Children's Parliaments and Child Rights Clubs in Kenya and Uganda have increased children's awareness of their rights and responsibilities, generated constructive dialogue between children and adults regarding issues of abuse, neglect, expected behaviour forms, and equipped children with information and support to report cases of abuse. At the same time, the Child Rights Clubs give children a platform to express their opinions, thoughts and concerns and activate schools (patrons, teachers and principals), communities (PSS volunteers) and homes (caregivers) to advocate on behalf of children's basic rights.

²Globe Tree was founded in 1982. In 2001 the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) authorized Globe Tree to establish and run a Children's Meeting Place on the grounds of United Nations, Nairobi. An acacia tree is the meeting place where children and decision makers of the world meet and dialogue on what is important for children. Today, mayors in many cities have inaugurated a Children's Meeting Place close to their city halls where they meet and listen to children.



Children's wishes for the world they envision, at an international children's conference in Nairobi, Kenya, February 2019. Photo: Malaika Mikaelsson.

There is also evidence that children emerge from participation processes confident that they have a right to express themselves and to be heard, however, as they leave school and become part of the adult world, they find it is dominated by people who do not see the need for, or are threatened by, the prospect of children's participation. This does not suggest that child participation cannot be 'mainstreamed', rather it highlights the need to support on-going local initiatives of advocacy, engagement with parents and teachers, local government, community leadership and media to make children's participation specifically with the local government become an accepted element of all aspects of democratic life; and to help build upon good practices to establish a regional movement to integrate children's participation into all social processes. Structures for child participation need to be part of formal institutions. There needs to be a greater commitment to incrementally build these structures for child participation.

Well planned, effective, and sustainable child participation can bring many benefits for both children and society. If child participation is well supported and meaningful it can be transformational for children's development, increase their protection, make for better policy and be a pathway to good governance and accountability at the local government.

In their quest to promote meaningful participation of children in activities that affect them, the concerned municipalities/counties must build on the existing efforts in child participation and address the gaps that have been identified to help in the sustainability replication of the gains/best practices. The counties must be able to institutionalize child and youth participation by developing structures, standards, capacities and processes, and by allocating resources for child and youth participation so that is integrated into local government processes and not remain ad hoc.



Photo: Shutterstock.com

Policy implications and recommendations

- Genuine promotion of children's participation by local government and institutions that ensures respect for children's views, and that their recommendations and concerns are followed up.
- The local municipalities and counties need to develop specific policy and legal frameworks, bearing in mind, the full participation of children in policy making and development to increase accountability and equity while promoting child participation.
- Objectively identify programmes within the partnership agreement that have demonstrated meaningful child participation and borrow lessons learnt for possible replication in other regions.
- Organize child-led forums and platforms for children to enhance and strengthen child participation internationally, regionally, nationally and locally in collaboration with national governments, local governments, association of local authorities, academia and civil society organizations.
- A paradigm shift to increasingly create awareness to the local governments to address the social attitudes that affect meaningful participation of children in decision making while addressing the root causes of problems affecting children.
- Develop laws, policies, and systems for the implementation of child participation, and adopt standards/guidelines to ensure that child participation initiatives conform to nationally benchmarked ethical norms and good practice principles.

**This policy brief is based on research
financed by ICLD**

ISBN 978-91-86725-40-2

Contact details

Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

Visiting address Söderväg 1D, 621 58 Visby
Telephone +46 498-29 91 00
E-mail info@icld.se
Web www.icld.se

