

Children Advocating for Children's Rights

A study from the Children's Council in Lebanon





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Acronyms

NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN:	United Nations
UNCRC:	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOHCHR:	United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights
WV:	World Vision
WVL:	World Vision Lebanon

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World Vision was founded in 1954 and has been active in Lebanon since 1975. World Vision promotes the well being of Lebanon's children and their communities through emergency relief, community development and advocacy.

Through its development projects, World Vision has improved schools, cared for the health of children, supported farmers, protected the environment, created new employment opportunities and provided a brighter future for refugees.

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The Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly affirms that children have the right to express an opinion, to be listened to and participate in decisions that affect their lives. This international treaty also recognises that children are agents of their own lives and that they are able to engage in decision-making and their views must be acted upon as appropriate. This study is an expression of the commitment of World Vision towards the participatory rights enshrined in the Convention.

This report analyses the ways that children have been able to contribute to child rights advocacy initiatives. It emerges from debate in the international development community, United Nations agencies and multilaterals who argue that child participation in advocacy is an emerging approach to enhance children's participation in the public sphere by giving them a voice on issues that are relevant to their lives.



This study shows that children are eager to participate in decision-making processes and engage in monitoring the implementation of policies and practices. The findings of this study are connected to the experiences of children in Lebanon where the study was conducted; however, we are confident that practitioners and stakeholders worldwide can benefit from the learning and experiences shared in this report.

I would like to invite you to use the findings and recommendations of this study to celebrate promising initiatives, to reflect on the challenges of securing equal participatory rights for; Boys and girls and to strengthen current practices in order to provide them with meaningful opportunities to participate.

In the context of the new global development framework, World Vision believes that one of the pivotal elements for delivering on the new Sustainable Development Goals is the recognition of the key contributions that children and young people can make to the process. In order to make this happen, we need to remove the obstacles to full participation and we must always remember that all children are entitled to the right to participate, including those who face poverty, discrimination, conflict or the consequences of disaster situations.

Charles Badenoch
Partnership Leader
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There is a common misconception held by most adults that children¹ do not possess the maturity and capacity to engage in advocacy and decision-making processes. However, a new wave of research and growing body of practitioners are indicating that children not only have the potential and the ability to make a change in their own lives but they also are able to influence advocacy if they are provided with meaningful opportunities for public participation.¹



Research has suggested that although the root causes that limit children's abilities to participate are political, economic, social and environmental,² it is often impossible to isolate the primary root cause to a specific problem. These factors are all interlinked and the absence of spaces for meaningful participation is an expression of that vulnerability. A growing body of evidence has also shown that child participation cannot be discussed without considering crucial issues such as the political climate of a country, power relations, unequal representation, ethnic segregation, gender discrimination and other factors that exclude children from participating equitably in community activities.³

Evidence suggests that there is a strong correlation between children who are involved in advocacy processes, and greater levels of confidence and positivity in terms of feeling protected and fully participating in life and decision-making.⁴ Many unanswered questions also arise, as to the benefits, if any, of involving children in advocacy processes, especially given the child protection and ethical considerations that need to be taken into account when involving children in the public arena.⁵ This report looks at providing some insights into these areas, based on World Vision Lebanon's experience.

The study aims to explore how the Children's Council platform contributes to give children the opportunity to advocate for children's rights. The main objectives are; (a) look at the intersection between child participation and advocacy initiatives conducted by World Vision in Lebanon; (b) examine the opportunities and constraints that children face when they engage in advocacy and practice based on the Children's Council experience; and (c) provide a set of recommendations on how best to move child participation forward through advocacy in a sustainable way.

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¹ In this study, children refer to any person under the age of 18 years, as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

03 Overview of the study

In order to better understand the approaches used and the challenges faced when undertaking child participation, this study seeks to give an in-depth look at the participatory methods used by World Vision Lebanon where the Children's Council is the primary model of participation. The theory of change¹¹ for the Children's Council and its participatory work with children is based on a fundamental belief. The belief that children in Lebanon can meaningfully contribute to the effectiveness of advocacy initiatives and debates when given the opportunity and space to share their opinions and perspectives about social justice, making them more connected to their needs and aspirations.



This study is based on the results of a secondary data analysis and was drawn from existing primary data collected for the purposes of other studies. This analysis included the utilisation of multiple qualitative data sets found in the following documents and materials as follows:

- Children Influencing Public Policy: Exploring constraints and opportunities in Lebanon report.⁶
- World Vision Lebanon Advocacy Department annual and semi-annual project reports.⁷
- Our uncertain future case study report.⁸
- Documentaries produced by members of the Children's Council: Letter to the Government of Lebanon on child trafficking and child labour, Letter to HM Queen Rania of Jordan on post-2015, photo-advocacy report on child trafficking, photo-advocacy report on anti-discrimination, child-led stakeholder report to the UN Human Rights Council, child-led report on the Syria crisis.

The questions that guided the focus and path of this study are:

- What are the opportunities and limitations that children experience when participating in advocacy issues at community and national levels?
- What are the personal and collective motivations for children to engage in advocacy initiatives?
- What are the factors that support and contribute to building the capacity of children to participate in advocacy activities while also being recognised as competent social actors in their communities?

Based on the findings, several key recommendations have been developed to inform and guide our practices, policies and strategies. This study also hopes to challenge traditional mindsets of people in order to promote more spaces for boys and girls where they can enjoy meaningful, ethical and safe programmes.

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¹¹ See the Children's Council Theory of Change in Appendix I

4.1 International obligations on child participation

From an international policy perspective, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides one of the most widely used definitions of child participation and sets up the concept of participation in decision-making which is:

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

This definition includes two pivotal rights:

- the right to express a view and
- the right to have the view given due weight.⁹

The first right to express a view freely refers to expressing relevant perspectives and experiences in order to influence decision-making. This right also takes into account the other civil rights granted in the UNCRC, such as the rights to freedom of expression, religion, conscience, privacy, association and information.¹⁰ The second right to have the view given due weight refers to the fact that children have the right to be listened and those views can be expressed in many ways and with no restrictions to age or maturity.¹¹ The UNCRC's definition does not consider participation as merely taking part in or being present in activities. It embraces a new perspective where children are entitled to participate in decision-making processes on issues which impact and affect their lives.

Additionally, this legal definition brought a new paradigm to the status of children by recognising them as subjects of rights. The UNCRC recognises children as experts of their own lives and that they are able to engage in decision-making in accordance with their evolving capacities and increasing autonomy.¹² This paradigm has an enormous impact on the nature of the relationship between children and adults.¹³

General Comment No. 12 expands on this and provides an explanatory definition of child participation:

Participation is an 'ongoing process, which includes information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.'¹⁴

This definition has three pivotal components:

- Impact in decision-making,
- Mutual respect between children and adults
- Joint learning process.¹⁵

From the definition itself, we can see an implicit recognition that child participation is both a process and an outcome¹⁶. Furthermore, the Committee stresses that the right to express a view includes an obligation for State Parties to *listen* to the views of children and facilitate their participation in all matters affecting them within the family, schools, institutions and judicial procedures.¹⁷ As a consequence of these participatory rights, States, as the main duty bearers, are called upon to develop frameworks that empower children to speak up for their rights and equip them with the space and skills to participate actively in decisions that affect their lives.¹⁸

The concept of participation emphasises that including children should not only be a momentary or singular act, but the starting point for an intense, ongoing and meaningful exchange between children and adults on the development of policies, programmes and measures in all relevant contexts of children's lives.¹⁹

4.2 Child participation models

In the literature on child participation, several prominent models in understanding and implementing child participation have been developed such as Hart's ladder of children's participation, Treseder's non-hierarchical circle of children's participation, and Shier's pathways to participation model.²⁰ For the purposes of this study, World Vision Lebanon uses Lansdown's model as a guide against which child participation can be analysed as it set different levels of participation. Lansdown outlines three types of participation, each type showing the different levels of power for children. Power is based on degrees between a lower and a higher level of participation, including a natural overlap between the categories:

- (1) Consultative participation
- (2) Collaborative participation
- (3) Child-led participation²¹

The first degree is *consultative participation* which refers to the recognition from adults that they do not have all the information and they need to consult children to get their views on specific issues. This practice is initiated, led and managed by adults.

The second degree is *collaborative participation* which implies the engagement of children in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects or activities. This process is adult-initiated but includes children as partners and empowers them to influence decisions.

The third degree is *child-led participation* which recognises children as empowered subjects who are able to take actions and manage decision-making. In this last degree of participation, adults have a facilitation role rather than a directive one. Children also choose whom they want to partner with.

This model also includes elements of empowerment and autonomy which are useful when analysing the different degrees of influence that children have when they participate in decision-making processes. With a focus on the impact from collective processes rather than individual action, the role of adults as facilitators is a key factor in assisting children to shape the process and final results.



4.3 Types of platforms for child participation

In general, there are several suitable formal and informal structures for child participation that provide children with the space to come together and make their voices heard in sustainable ways.²² The different structures vary according to objectives, membership and complexity of the organisation. Some of the most recognisable structures are children's clubs, student's association, children's councils and children's parliaments.²³ In figures 2 and 3, it can be seen their distinguishing characteristics and their strengths and challenges.

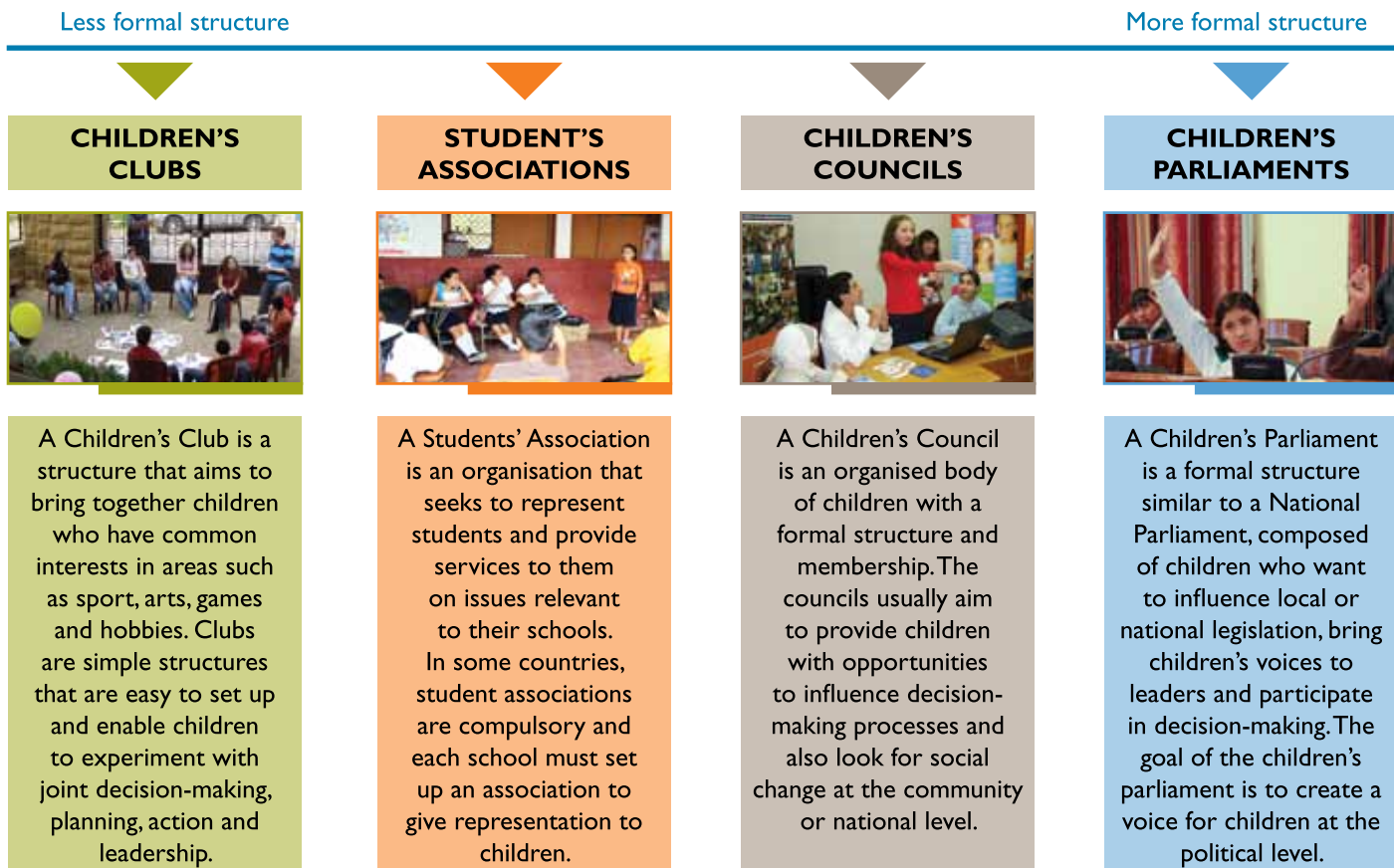


Figure 1 Structures for child participation

Children's Clubs	Student's Associations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively easy and cost effective to set up • Generally for recreational activities • Little say in vision, missions, goals • Few opportunities to participate in public debates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More decision-making space • Reliant/dependant on school governance structures and democratic systems • May not be completely representative • Difficult to show whether election of members is truly democratic or not
Children's Councils	Children's Parliaments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal organised group of children but with a flexible structure and loose membership • Good opportunities to participate and influence decision-making at the local and national levels • Requires significant efforts to build structures and systems • Flexible as community based project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed structure and elections • Provides a platform for the participation of children and young people in advocacy and political processes at the national level • Maximise the opportunity to influence the policies that affect children and young people • Main concern is representativeness and long-term sustainability

Figure 2 Strengths and challenges of the structures of child participation

4.4 Child participation in advocacy

Child participation in advocacy refers to the process where empowered and mobilised groups of children engage directly in initiatives that aim to influence governments and decision-makers to change or improve policies and practices on issues that matter to them, especially the well-being of the most vulnerable children.²⁴ Child participation in advocacy includes the involvement of children in the four dimensions of advocacy work: policy influence, policy implementation, citizen empowerment and engagement with decision-makers.

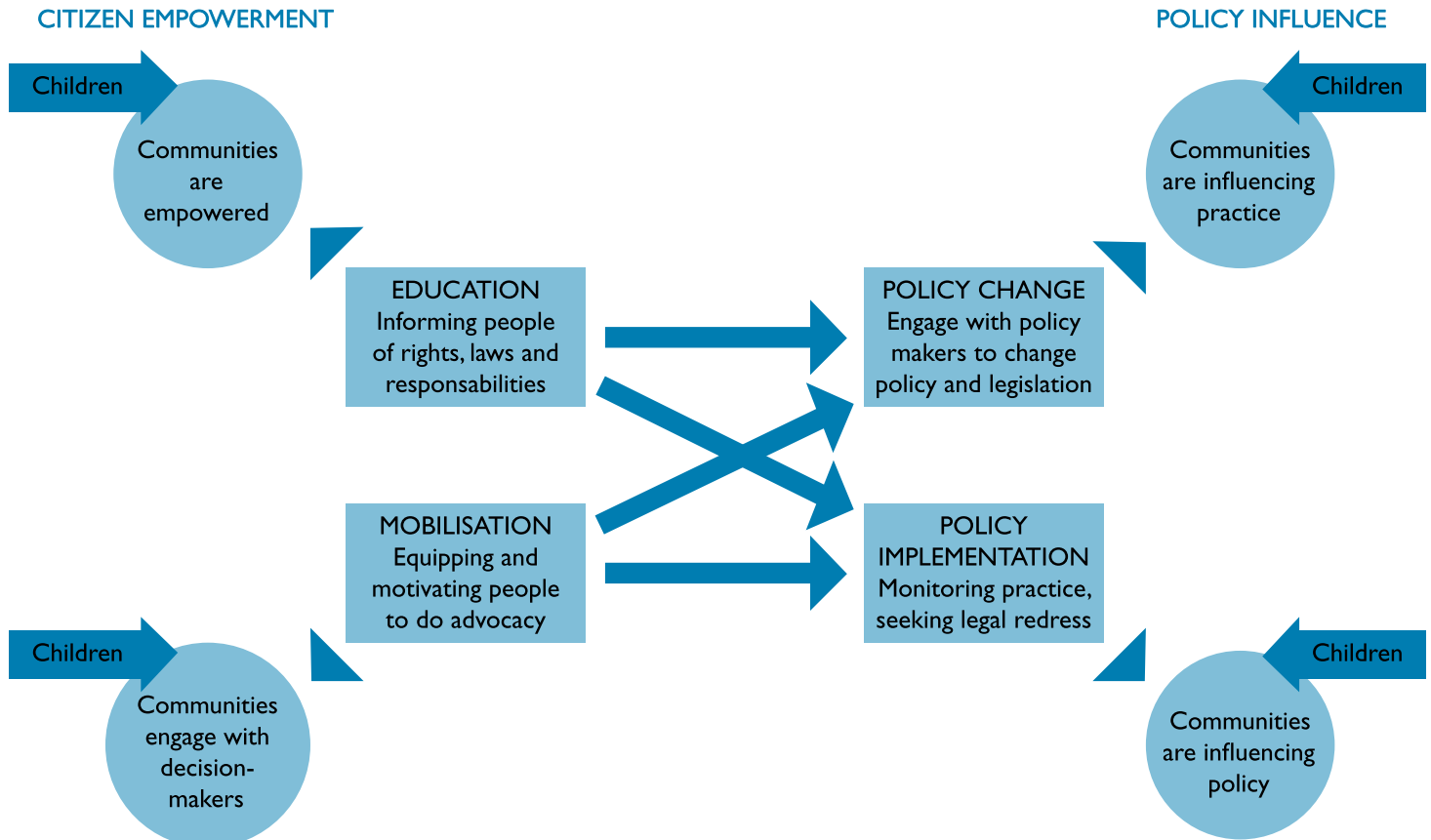


Figure 3 World Vision approach to advocacy

In order to unpack this definition, the term *engage directly* refers to the process where children participate or start an advocacy initiative to support a change in policy, attitudes and practice by contributing input to decisions or taking action on issues that affect their lives.²⁵ The notion of *issues that matter to them* refers to the opportunity to meaningfully participate and their ability to determine the impact that these issues have on their lives.²⁶ This concept also includes the requirement that children are given space to determine the agenda, topics and issues they wish to address.

A very high-level of child participation in advocacy occurs when children conduct their own child-led advocacy initiatives, which implies that they design, implement and evaluate their own advocacy initiatives. This does not imply that adults are excluded from the initiative; on the contrary, adults are included and have a key role to play as facilitators and providing capacity building to children.

Child-led advocacy initiatives generally require that children are organised in any form of associations and this is usually done by their own constituencies such as Children's Councils, Child Parliaments, Child Congresses, Child Leadership Forums, and Child-led Citizen Voice and Action groups.

The active engagement of children in advocacy contributes to linkages from local to national advocacy initiatives, enhance local monitoring of services and allocation of budget for children issues, and promote the inclusion of children's rights issues in national law and policy reform.

5.1 World Vision Advocacy Initiatives in Lebanon

One of the main approaches of the advocacy work in World Vision Lebanon is to empower children as social actors and equip them with the skills and tools to engage in advocacy work themselves. Advocacy initiatives therefore consist of a strong focus on mobilising children and supporting them to advocate in their communities at the grassroots level.²⁷ In doing this, children can play an important and necessary role in removing the barriers that prevent them from enjoying their rights.

As part of its overall strategy, World Vision Lebanon unveiled the Children's Council project in 2008 as its approach to achieve its advocacy objectives. This decision was based on the finding from a 2007 assessment conducted by World Vision Lebanon where the lack of space to participate was one of the key issues highlighted by child respondents. Children stated that they seldom had the chance to participate, to express their opinions and to be listened to. The assessment also showed that there was a lack of regular social or cultural activities for all children to learn and play with each other regardless of their different religions, ethnic or political backgrounds and nationalities.

5.2 The Children's Council

The Children's Council is a space where children are equipped with tools, knowledge and skills to enable them to influence their communities and peers in order to contribute to a more just and peaceful society. Designed to promote informed and effective participation in advocacy efforts, World Vision Lebanon identified the Children's Council as the most suitable structure to foster meaningful child participation according to the objectives of its advocacy strategy.

World Vision Lebanon defines the Children's Council as follows:

A body of child members set up at the community level to provide a space for children to engage in grassroots advocacy initiatives and to promote informed and effective participation. The Children's Council aims to build children's capacities on child rights, development and peace education, and to equip children with tools, knowledge and skills to enable them to influence their communities and peers to contribute to a more just and egalitarian society.²⁸

What will it achieve?

- **Develop life skills:** Girls and boys develop life skills such as self-confidence, self-awareness and self-esteem.
- **Create opportunities for engagement:** Opportunities are created for children to meet and give their views on what matters to them and how they can contribute to the society around them.
- **Respect diversity:** The Children's Council also encourages children to become key social actors in promoting respect for diversity, protection and dialogue in their communities.

Key objectives:

1. Create an adequate space for children to participate and meet peers from different backgrounds across social, religious and ethnic boundaries, especially the most vulnerable.
2. Contribute to children's empowerment by involving them in decision-making processes about issues that affect them.
3. Build children's capacities on child rights, life skills, tolerance and diversity.
4. Engage children in learning about social-justice-centred topics.
5. Provide children with opportunities to use their skills and talents.
6. Create young leaders and ambassadors who can advocate for a healthy community with a child rights focus.
7. Equip children with tools and knowledge to enable them to implement their own child-led initiatives and influence their communities and peers.

The three main components of the Children's Council are:

Representation and peer election: The Children's Council is established at the community level where local representatives are elected by their peers. The local representatives become members of the Assembly of Representatives, who in turn elect the Board members. Every two years there is a rotation of board members.

Capacity building of child advocates: Children learn about child rights, child protection, life skills, advocacy techniques and peace education, providing them with opportunities to use their skills and talents for social change.

Influencing policies at multiple levels: Children are equipped with tools to implement their own child-led initiatives and influence decision-making and impacting policy not only in their community, but even at national and global levels.

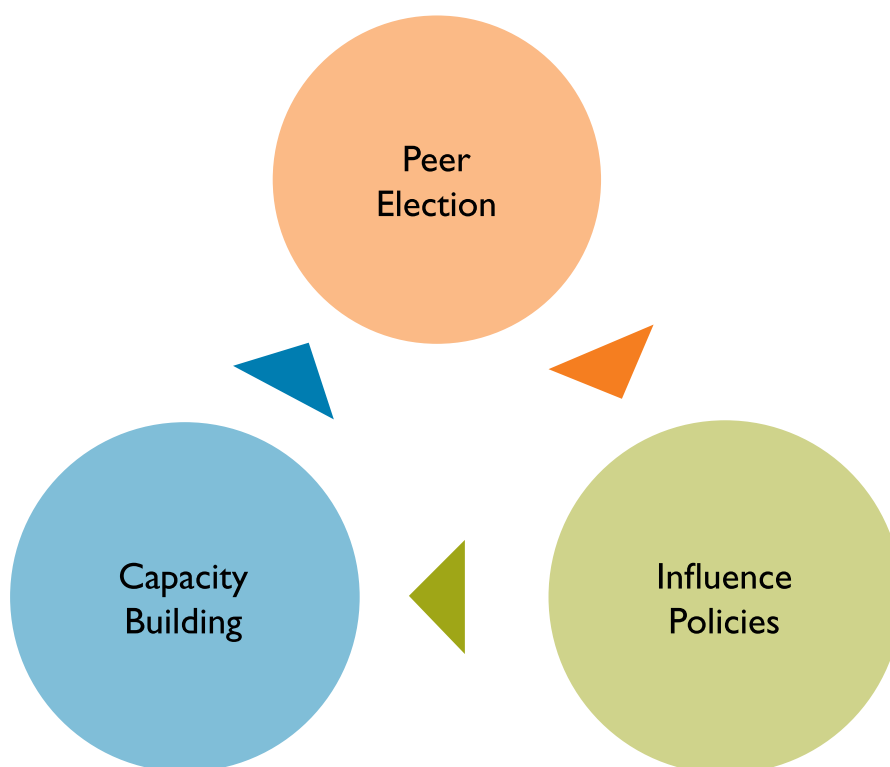


Figure 4 Components of the Children's Council

Guiding principles

The key cross-cutting issues at all stages of the Children's Council's activities are:

- Gender equality
- Best interest of the child
- Social cohesion
- Non-discrimination

Structure

The Children's Council is a structure divided into two levels: the Local Children's Council, and the Board Council.

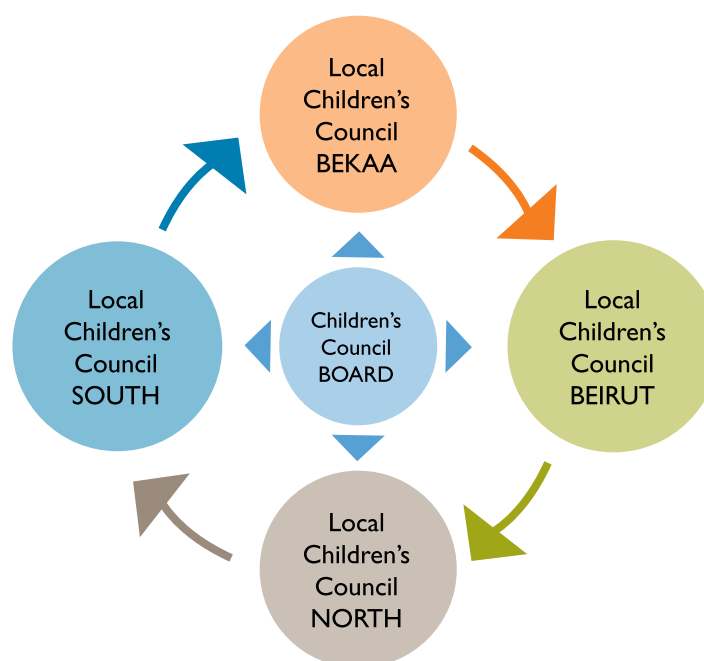


Figure 5 Children's Council structure

At the local level, Children's Councils are each comprised of 20 children ranging from ages 12-17. Each Council elects four delegates (two girls and two boys) who represent the local council. They meet on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. The members engage in several activities, including:

- Participating in monthly recreational activities and capacity-building events, including workshops on leadership skills, child rights, peace education and other related themes.
- Carrying out child-led campaigns at the grassroots level.
- Providing input on specific issues raised by children in their communities via participation in consultations, community mapping and other similar activities with an added focus of reaching the most vulnerable children.

The Board Council is composed of six members: three girls and three boys. They are elected in a democratic election for a two-year term. Board members share responsibilities based on their interests. The structure does not consider a chair of the board. They meet two times per year. Their responsibilities are:

- Representing children at national and global events.
- Acting as spokespeople for media interviews and attending meetings with stakeholders.
- Participating in planning, organising and evaluating Children's Council activities.

This section describes the main issues emerging from the analysis and review of the documents and materials which have been analysed according to four themes:

- Initiatives and space in which children have successfully engaged in influencing advocacy issues.
- Opportunities and limitations that children experience when participating in advocacy issues at community and national levels.
- Personal and collective motivations for children to engage in advocacy initiatives.
- Factors that support and contribute to improving children's abilities to participate in advocacy activities and be recognised as competent social actors in their communities.



6.1 Initiatives and space in which children have successfully engaged in influencing advocacy issues

The Children's Councils implemented several child-led initiatives to influence their communities and public opinion on issues that affect the children's lives. The Council members agreed on topics and developed activities that ranged from community campaigns to producing stakeholder reports presented at the United Nations.

6.1.1 Initiative I: Child-led report submitted to UN Human Rights Council and attending the 9th UN UPR Session in Geneva

In 2010, members of the Children's Council drafted their own submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review (UPR), marking the first time that a report written by children was submitted to the UPR mechanism. Over a three-month period, children attended workshops to increase their skills and creativity which enabled them to share their experiences by writing their own report. Topics covered by the report included violence against children, street children, children with disabilities, non-ID children and the effects of cluster bombs and landmines. Children engaged in data collection and report writing. Once the children finalised the child-friendly field-based research, their findings were presented to the UN Human Rights Council's in Geneva.

Following the submission of the report, one member of the Children's Council attended the 9th United Nations UPR session that examined the human rights situation in Lebanon. The child representative attended sessions and met high-ranking UN officials and representatives of Geneva-based child rights agencies.

One of the major internal outcomes of this initiative was the use of this methodology by other World Vision offices that have conducted similar initiatives using the same model implemented by the Children's Council. After this submission, other children's groups in other countries were encouraged by this experience and submitted their own reports, for example children's groups supported by World Vision Ghana and World Vision Albania.

As an external outcome, the submission made by the Children's Council was accepted by the UN Human Rights Council. The Deputy High Commissioner of the United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, Ms. Kang, stated that the child-led report submitted by the Children's Council proves that children can articulate their own rights, and can get involved in human rights work in many ways.

One of our big achievements we had in the Children's Council was a report we wrote to the United Nations. It was called UPR. We conducted a research about the main problems that children experience in Lebanon. We interviewed people, we read reports. Many people commented that this was something very big for children and we were able to do it... and we enjoyed doing it. Somebody asked me how we did it, I said that it was easy because we talked about our own experiences. (Boy, aged 17)

The Children's report was included in the Stakeholder Report compiled by the UNOHCHR and was presented during the session that reviewed the human rights situation in Lebanon.²⁹ Two of the recommendations from the children's report were included in the final country report presented to the Lebanese government for comment and response. The Lebanese Government was held accountable to respond to the issues and recommendations raised by the children. This was the first time that a government was required to respond to UPR recommendations made by children. The Government of Lebanon responded back to the Human Rights Council and accepted the UPR recommendations with respect to the three issues that children raised: child trafficking, child labour and demining.

The report we wrote to the United Nations was personally important to me. It was the first time that we had the opportunity to write something that important, and we represented the voices of many children which are not heard. We did the report with dedication and took it seriously. We prayed that adults would read it seriously too. (Girl, aged 16)

This child-led report paved the way for a growing openness of the government to listen to children's voices, and enhanced the participation of children in civil society consultation for the UPR process.³⁰

6.1.2 Initiative 2:

National campaign to end violence against children

The Children's Council members joined the annual campaign 'Protect Children from Violence Month' run by World Vision to raise awareness about the violence that affects children and to emphasise the key role that government, local and international entities play in addressing the causes of violence.

Children's Council members were active participants both at the local and national level. Board members were the main speakers at the press conference to launch the campaign and developed a position statement calling for an end to violence against children. The event received well attention from the media. As part of the campaign, children actively engaged in producing a "Child-friendly version of the United Nation Violence against Children (UNVAC) Report" aimed at promoting the end of violence against children.

I am very committed to fight against violence. We cannot say that children have rights if children are beaten. Every time I have the chance in the Children's Council, I choose to talk about violence against children. I have written stories, speeches and statements against violence. I think and hope that all of them have helped a little to open the conversation about violence that is still a hidden issue in Lebanon. (Girl, aged 13)



As internal outcomes, children stated that they changed their own mind-set and became more aware of the impact that their participation can make in campaigning and other advocacy initiatives. Children said that through the campaign they learned how to become leaders in their communities and how to influence others and achieve positive change. In terms of external outcomes, as a result of their engagement in the campaign, members of the Children's Council were viewed differently by decision-makers, key stakeholders and staff members. It is believed that there was a change in mind-set about the abilities and maturity of children to participate in the public arena and being competent social actors.

I was very impressed when I met the Children's Council who requested a meeting with me to hand over a recommendation report about issues that affect their lives. They were very articulate and confident. I never thought that children would be able to influence policies, but they changed my mindset. We will use their recommendation letter to influence government officials and Members of Parliament.³¹ (National-level stakeholder).

6.1.3 Initiative 3: Boys and girls lobbying stakeholders

Members of the Children's Council actively engaged in initiatives aimed at building their own capacities to advocate on behalf of children who are vulnerable to trafficking or labour exploitation. Children were provided with the tools and the space to conduct their own advocacy campaign in their communities.

Members of the Children's Council presented their own recommendations to the government of Lebanon and UNICEF Lebanon on how to better protect child victims of child rights violations. Children drafted the recommendation report as part of an initiative aimed at giving them opportunities to be influential leaders in their communities and at the national level. Children themselves visited the Director of UNICEF Lebanon and the Secretary General of the Lebanese Higher Council for Childhood, and handed their recommendation report directly to them.

I was a bit nervous before we met the people in the government. I was not sure if they will respect us or make fun of us. The good thing was that we were accompanied by our facilitator from World Vision and this gave us the confidence we needed, we were not alone. Meetings went very well. We impressed them because we were well-prepared. (Girl, aged 13)

As a result of this initiative, one of the internal outcomes was the increased capacity of members of the Children's Council to be influential leaders in their own communities and at the national level. The UNICEF representative who received the child delegates was impressed by the quality of the child-led report, the children's confidence and their ability to articulate the issues clearly.

An external outcome was that collectively, the actions conducted by children contributed to the awareness on child trafficking, changed the mindsets of stakeholders regarding the participation of children in these types of issues, and generated debates on mechanisms of prevention and protection for vulnerable children.

6.1.4 Initiative 4:

Children's Council lobbies Queen Rania on the post-2015 development agenda



The Children's Council decided to engage in the debate about the Millennium Development Goals -MDGs and the post-2015 development agenda. Children discussed the global goals which should follow the MDGs to ensure that children, especially the most vulnerable, are placed at the centre of the next generation of development goals. The members of the Children's Council wrote a letter to HM Queen Rania of Jordan that outlined their priorities for the post-2015 development framework. In the letter, they highlighted the themes of violence against children including sexual abuse, discrimination, refugees, drug abuse, children and young people's participation in decision-making, and poverty as their main issues of concern.

As an inspiring external outcome, HM Queen Rania of Jordan responded to the children's letter and expressed her admiration for their efforts. While she did not explicitly commit to raising the issues presented by the children to the Post 2015 High-Level Panel, the children nevertheless believed that their report contributed to reminding decision-makers that children should be at the centre of the new development framework.

6.1.5 Initiative 5:

Child-led advocacy report researched and written by Syrian refugee children³²

This project provided opportunities for Syrian refugee children to come together, reflect upon their experiences, conduct their own research on the issues that affect them and eventually produce their own child advocacy report.

The overall goal of this initiative was to examine the opportunities and constraints that children face in their status as refugees from Syria, and to give them the opportunity to influence the crisis response by expressing their concerns, needs and aspirations. The objectives were to: (a) contribute to children's empowerment by involving them as active researchers on issues that affect them; (b) provide children with skills, tools and knowledge to conduct their own research, and (c) enable children to share their own findings and recommendations about the refugee situation.

The child researchers generated data that represented the social experiences, opinions, perceptions and beliefs provided by the child participants in the research. Child researchers analysed the information collected according to four settings such as home, school, community and country. The report, which is believed to be the first-ever written by children in the midst a large-scale emergency, was launched in March 2014 to mark the third year of the Syrian crisis. World Vision held public events and disseminated report copies to government representatives, UN officials, local and international civil society, members of Parliaments, multilaterals, government international development agencies and representatives of the media.

In the published report, the child authors called for:

- The fighting to stop, the war to end and peace to spread among the parties in the conflict so they can go back home.
- The chance to help other children, saying 'we belong to one generation.'
- The chance to take part in relief efforts and help other Syrian refugees and friends. Children sought opportunities to help other children of their generation, a generation which is at risk of being lost.
- Host countries to provide legal support for refugees to be able to move freely and to provide them with the basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter, school and job opportunities.
- Host communities to treat them better and to accept them until this crisis is over.
- The international community to press their governments to cooperate to help them and end this crisis.



6.1.6 Initiative 6: Boys and girls engagement in global advocacy fora

As part of their commitment to social justice issues, particularly on peacebuilding, children's rights and gender equality, one board member from the Children's Council participated in the launch of the Inter-Agency Guiding Principles for Child and Youth Participation in Peacebuilding, which was conducted in New York. During this multi-agency event, the child delegate spoke substantively about what the new peacebuilding guidelines mean for her and her peers from the Children's Council. She also explained the obstacles that need to be addressed to put these guidelines into action globally. As result of the participation of the child delegate, the guiding principles for child participation in peacebuilding have been reviewed and a child-friendly version produced. The same board member wrote an article on gender equality that was published in the Brussels-based newspaper Girls Rights Gazette. In this article she called stakeholders to pay attention to the gender dimension of child participation, especially those living in conflict-prone areas.

As part of the post-2015 development agenda, members of the Children's Council attended a regional forum in Istanbul to debate how the new set of goals is taking into account children and young people's needs. The participants produced a declaration about their perspectives on the process and what they want to see in the post-2015 debate. This declaration was sent to members of the post-2015 High-Level Panel who were appointed by the UN Secretary-General.

A child delegate was selected to represent his peers in a global event organised by the UN General Assembly to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This high-level event was conducted at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The key messages delivered by the child representative were that the world is a better place for children today than it was 25 years ago but not for all children. He pointed out that the quality of children's lives continues to vary by where they are born, their ethnicity, whether they are a boy or a girl, whether they have a disability, the income of their family and whether they live in rural or urban areas, along with multiple other variables. He called the government representatives to erase the inequities that rob children of their rights.



6.2 Opportunities and limitations that children experience when participating in advocacy issues at community and national levels

The studies reviewed indicate that the context in which child participation takes place is pivotal in understanding how this practice is implemented and accepted in different ways according to the settings, cultural norms and ideological values.³³ Children experience different reactions from adults according to the setting where they participate. For example, children who were interviewed said that they are an empowered and articulate group of children who actively participate in decision-making at the national level, but then experience severe limitations to their participation in their families and schools.³⁴ This is consistent with studies that indicate that empowerment and autonomy are connected to the environments and contexts where children participate.³⁵

6.2.1 Tensions between beliefs, cultural values, practices, systems and the rights discourse on participation

There is a strong correlation between child participation, democratic contexts and the broader culture of rights.³⁶ So, if one of the factors is weak or missing, children will have fewer opportunities to participate and make their voices heard. In the studies, children themselves noted that there is a major difference between the Children's Council as their structure for participation and the rest of the spaces where participation is restricted, discouraged or poorly implemented.

We children have many limitations to participate. We do not have many opportunities or the opportunities are not that good because many adults do not know how to treat children, and they are not prepared to work with children. However, in my organisation, adults are very well prepared. They are ready to listen to children; they have patience. (Girl, aged 16)

The studies indicate that many adults still appear to perceive that children are non-citizens and they are not entitled to participatory rights. However, respondents in the studies consider that there have been significant changes in the mindset of people. This may vary depending on the particular setting and social structure. For example, many of the participants who took part in the children influencing public policy study noted that the Children's Council is a very unique space where they are treated as equal partners and decisions are made in agreement with children. They highlighted that they felt empowered and respected. However when they returned to their daily activities at schools or home, they perceived a big gap between the empowering space of the Council and other restricted environments.

I have been participating in many groups but every experience is different. In most of the cases, adults treat us as children who cannot make decision, and they do not take our opinion seriously. It is normal to hear "you are just children." (Girl, aged 12)

Families and community members appear to face a dilemma between traditional cultural values and the values promoted in the UNCRC with regard to child participation. The opportunities and the likelihood to be listened to by adults and other stakeholders increase when it occurs outside family settings. Beliefs about what children are capable of vary in different cultural contexts³⁷ and appears to be a link between fewer spaces for child participation and cultural norms and values. One of the major limitations revealed was the patriarchal system in Lebanon, in which the males are the central figures in the decision-making process. According to a gender report³⁸ in Lebanon, men make most of the decisions in the house and in communities, and women and children are often excluded from decision-making.³⁹



Lebanon is a country with a strong patriarchal culture where parents decide on behalf of children. The family values are contradictory to the culture of rights and participation. (Government official)

Another factor that studies show is the tension between discipline, protection and participation. A report suggested that the Lebanese consider the cornerstone of their society to be the family, which provides all the safety and protection that children need.⁴⁰ On the other hand, data suggested that families do not value participation on the same level as discipline, protection and safety.

I think my opinion does not count too much in my home, I am very young, so I need to follow my older siblings and they need to follow my parents. We do not contradict them, we respect them. Discipline is more important than participation. We always hear that children are making problems and we need more discipline. (Girl, aged 12)

Due to some changes in the way that some parents and community members think, a number of children are in a position to build their own space for participation at the household level, despite the limitations imposed by the local culture, values and practices. Despite the gap between the freedom they experience in the Children's Council and the restrictions at home, there are some considerable changes especially for those children who have been more visible and recognised as leaders in their groups due to their participation in high-level meetings, conferences and media interview. This recognition of children as active social actors has brought some changes in mindsets of adults, and children are perceived to be more knowledgeable and empowered.

Participation relies on parents, at the end they make the decision if you can attend or not an activity. If you do not get their permission, you cannot join the activity. This is sad. (Boy, aged 13)

My group and I do many things and we meet many people and we train many children, we feel that we can make a change. But if our parents do not agree, we cannot do anything. Some parents need some session to understand our activities. (Girl, aged 12)

A distinction also emerges between the public and private spheres. For example in the studies some children appear to have more opportunities in public debate rather in private decision-making processes due to their participation in the Children's Council and being recognised as a formal constituency supported by a large organisation. The line becomes blurred as there are many other factors, for instance gender, religion and ethnicity, which can play a critical role in limiting the participation of children and young people in decision-making processes, both in private and public settings. In the same line, the inclusion of the most vulnerable children remains as an unresolved issue.

Boys and girls are treated differently but it depends of the family, the schools and the religion. In some places girls cannot even attend an activity or to be with boys in the same place. In my case, I notice the difference that people make between boys and girls but I think I have the same rights and opportunities, but the first opportunity is always for a boy. (Girl, aged 12)



6.2.2 Participation varies according to context

Levels of participation vary according to the settings and contexts. The following emerged from the studies:

- The different contexts and settings where adults are willing to provide space for children to participate such as communities, municipalities, non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and government.
- How the opportunities to participate differ between home, school, community, and other settings.
- The limitations based on structures, values or sustainability.

6.2.2.1 Communities and Municipalities

There appears to be an increasing space for children to participate at the municipal level in Lebanon according to NGO workers who took part in the studies. They are implementing projects in partnership with municipalities in order to include children and young people in decision-making at the local level. Nonetheless, there are substantial limitations at the municipal level posed by cultural and political restrictions.

Despite the achievements, there are still significant restrictions in terms of the level of participation of children and the impact they could have on adult decision-making processes. Children appear to be generally invited to be part of activities but excluded from decision-making. Scholars argue that one of the most significant objections to child participation practices is the fact that it does not provide real power to children.⁴¹

Participation of children is also politically manipulated. For example, in many municipalities mobilisation of children is done by traditional political parties and religious movements. There is not real participation of children. (Male key informant, NGO worker)

The studies indicate that children can influence adult decisions at various levels in the community where they live. However, children should create or join groups that allow them to have representation in the communities and to gain credibility based on the organisation's structures and activities. The Children's Council does not interact with municipalities as its activities are more community-based or national level focused. However, the Children's Council as an organised and peer-elected body of children could have a role in influencing decision-making at the municipal level and could engage in certain advocacy activities, for example regarding prevention of violence against children and inclusion of children in planning and designing municipal initiatives.

6.2.2.2 Non-governmental organisations

Non-governmental organisations-NGOs in Lebanon appear to have played a key role in creating spaces for children to participate, and have developed methodologies for strengthening child participation at the community or national levels. There have been changes in the value accorded to children's opinions due to the programmes implemented by NGOs. They have established good foundations to promote a decision-making process that is more collaborative and inclusive for children. This is consistent with scholars that argue that children will be unlikely to express their views unless they have the conditions that support them to develop those views.⁴²

Although some child-focused NGOs tend to include a strong child participation component in their projects as one of their programmatic interventions, they did so without preparing the parents, community members and other adults. It is critical to work with all stakeholders at all levels to ensure that they are prepared to listen to children and include them in decision-making processes. Other issues emerged were the dichotomy between one-time event and an ongoing process, and what happens with the engagement of children once the initiative has finished.

6.2.2.3 Government

The Lebanese government, especially the Higher Council for Childhood under the Ministry of Social Affairs, is considered to have increased the opportunities for children to participate in different levels of decision-making processes. Nevertheless the participation of children is still seen as a novelty or something relatively external to the local culture and too progressive. Indeed, it is absent from other parts of the governance system.

The Higher Council for Childhood conducted extensive consultation processes with children in order to get their insights about child protection issues, such as the use, access and applicability of help-lines. All the information gathered from the children was included in the national child protection strategy. This good practice is considered as something unusual within the government structure. However, the efforts of the Higher Council for Childhood and the Ministry of Social Affairs to incorporate children's perspectives into the governmental agenda have received recognition.

I met very important people from the government and we handed over a report on child labour and child trafficking. They were very respectful and listened to us. They were interested in our opinion and how we gathered the information to write the report, however I am wondering if they used that report. If they did not use it, I am still happy and proud of our work. We did something important. (Girl, aged 13)

It is important to create more space for children to participate in governance structures and to develop a participatory model that encourages government officials to provide children with space to participate. However, the data from the studies indicated that there was a perception that some government officials do not have the skills, knowledge and willingness to include children in decision-making processes.



The practice of child participation requires significant cultural changes for it to be effective.⁴³ Child participation itself can also contribute to changes in the mindsets of people and the cultural values of a community. Central to this process of change is strengthening the coordination between the initiatives conducted at the household, community, municipal and national levels. According to respondents, dialogue and communication among children and stakeholders are critical to reducing the gap between the contexts and minimising the tensions between the right to participate, as an ideological standpoint, and the cultural values that perceive participation as an alien concept that undermines the structure of the family and community.

6.3 Personal and collective motivations for children to engage in advocacy initiatives

Individual child participation refers to the actions that a girl or boy takes in order to engage in a decision-making process based on an individual interest. Collective child participation refers to the involvement of an organised group of children who decide collectively to take part in decision-making process in order to achieve a shared and agreed upon goal.⁴⁴

Most of the children who took part in the studies expressed interest in participating in activities that provided them with opportunities to discuss advocacy issues and make their voices heard by stakeholders, policy-makers, and local or national representatives. Their participation in advocacy debates was considered to be an empowering experience that helped them to contribute to mainstreaming children's rights into policies and practices at the local or national levels. Indeed, they believed that while participating in decision-making processes they can develop their self-esteem, life skills and a greater sense of responsibility and involvement in democratic participation.

Definitely, the children are ready to send good messages to the community. We have many things to say and want to say to everyone. Children are passionate because we are doing things from our heart. We are motivated because we did many things that we never thought we were able to do, and we did them. (Boy, aged 16)

The studies indicate that children believe they can influence their peers and communities if they are organised into groups or associations: "the most important thing is to learn how to work in a team, because each one can contribute with one skill, so the group can become stronger." They consider that a child alone cannot achieve too many things, but an organised group of children can make a difference in the community and be able to influence other spheres of public life.

The important thing is that we did everything as a group; because of this we became stronger. (Boy, aged 16)

Yes, in my group everyone wants to do something, to change things. To fight for the things we consider important. We have good ideas and we just need to put them into action. We give our ideas, we vote and we make decisions. (Girl, aged 14)

Choosing suitable child participation structures that enable children to meaningfully participate in a truly democratic process is essential whether formal or informal. Organisations or structures provide children with legitimacy and credibility with their own constituencies. Care must be taken to ensure that these structures do not only represent the children who choose to become actively involved but also represent a wider group of children. The process for the selection of children is also crucial in order to build an inclusive and representative child organisation. However, child participants mentioned that they perceive that they have more opportunities than other children to participate because they are part of a formal structure. They acknowledged that this is a result of being part of a formal structure that gives them certain recognition and credibility. Groups such as the Children's Council are an important platform to hear children's priorities.

The Children's Council is very important to me. This is the first time that I have the opportunity to belong to somewhere. I really think that I belong to this group that represents me and gives me the chance to say the things I want to say. Other people are now paying attention to our opinion because we are not longer alone, we are part of a group and this gives us more respect. (Girl, aged 13)

Children appear to have a natural interest in participating in activities to tackle issues that matter to them, and child rights appear to be one of the most relevant issues in which they can get involved as well as make it known and respected.

I think we should try to do more awareness sessions with adults about child rights. Children's rights should be a law in the country, so everyone will abide by the law. The law can oblige people to respect children, and give them more space to participate. (Girl, aged 16)

Including a wide range of topics to be discussed with social justice-makers seems to be a key issue and in Lebanon special emphasis was placed on education, discrimination, violence, life skills and empowerment. This thematic approach, however, requires a methodology that respects children's evolving capacities, but also ensures a professional and evidence-based technical analysis of the themes. Children want to contribute to changes in their society in order to improve the life conditions of all children rather than to focus on their personal interests as individuals. The studies indicate a strong sense of solidarity with all children regardless of origin, nationality, ethnicity and religion which appear to contradict the commonly held belief that the Lebanese care only about their own communities, ethnic or religious groups.

I am not a refugee but I care about refugees, I have a house and go to school but I care about street children. Discrimination is the worst thing that can happen to a person; we are all equal, God creates us equal but people insist in making difference among people. (Girl, aged 13)



6.4 Factors that support and contribute to improving children's abilities to participate in advocacy initiatives

The studies reviewed indicate that the success factors of the child participation initiatives conducted under the umbrella of the Children's Council are:

1. Children are provided with complete information about the project and they make an informed decision of joining the group.
2. Children are able to inform their own agenda.
3. Sessions and workshops are child-friendly.
4. Materials are produced in the local language.
5. Methodology focuses on helping children to share their inner thoughts and opinions in smaller groups.
6. Children are equipped with the tools and skills to make their own decisions regarding the content and structure of the activities or projects that they want to carry out.
7. Children have a strong sense of ownership of the project and belonging to the Children's Council.

All of these factors are key components of the World Vision International Child Participation Guidelines⁴⁵ which have been embedded into programming in Lebanon⁴. Some of these factors are analysed in more detail in the following paragraphs based on the findings from the documents reviewed.

6.4.1 Quality of adult interaction with children

Adult facilitator

The studies indicate that there is a direct correlation between the success of a child participation initiative and the capabilities of the adult facilitator who is responsible for working with children. For example the capabilities of facilitators of the Children's Council appear to have been crucial to the accomplishment of the objectives of their activities. The emotional and behavioural components of the facilitator's personality seem to be more important than the knowledge and technical skills. The relationship and the support provided by the facilitator are valued and this is contrasted with other adult professionals who are perceived to lack the skills and tools to work with children.

He always encourages me to participate. He never leaves children alone and he always finds the way that children can participate. He gives us ideas and supports our activities. (Girl, aged 14)

The following skills and abilities are considered important for child participants: "he (the facilitator) reacts rapidly to any given situation, takes children's opinions into consideration, has a sense of humour, is cultured and well-educated, has a good heart, has a joyful spirit, does not hurt children's feelings, has good ideas, communicates using easy language, is charming and sympathetic to children."⁴⁶ This set of social skills and personal characteristics are rarely included in jobs description and are not considered important components of performance appraisals. Children however consider that it is imperative to take into account these skills and that they should also have a say in the evaluation of their facilitators in order to ensure that staff member performance furthers the organisational child participation goals.



The adults in our group are well prepared... they are more sociable than other adults. They are always transparent, and they ask us the things we want to do. They always consult with us. (Boy, aged 17)

When adults are well trained to work with children, the children appear to enjoy the activities and stay with the same group for a long period of time. This is confirmed by scholars that pointed out that children often require and seek guidance, support and teaching from more experienced members of the society.⁴⁷

In many organisations it can happen that the adults do not know how to treat children, and they are not prepared to work with them. However, in my organisation adults are very well prepared. They are ready to listen to children, they have patience. They are always listening and asking questions. They never do something without consulting us. They ask us the things we want to do, and then we vote for the things that are more interesting for us and they respect our decisions. (Girl, aged 16)

When implementing children's activities, the selection of an adult facilitator is essential for long-term success, and critical in bringing change to the way staff members work. Facilitators should challenge their own traditional attitudes that discourage the participation of children based on the belief that they are not ready to make choices in important matters in their lives. For instance, a report from Central America suggests that many children drop out of activities or programs due to bad experiences with their adult facilitators, especially when they feel that they are being harassed, obliged to do something that they are not interested in, or they are subjected to violence and discrimination by both adults and peers.⁴⁸

Stakeholders and decision-makers

The lack of ability of stakeholders and advocacy actors to deal with children was cited in the documents as a major constraint “people need to change the way they are doing things. They need to change their thinking on child participation⁴⁹.” Government officials and political authorities may face challenges and experience difficulty in understanding the process of child participation. Decision-makers can often lack personal characteristics to deal with children, may not be flexible, are not able to explain complicated concepts in a child-friendly language and may listen with bias or judgment.

The ability to listen [...] is rarer than we assume. We need to be flexible and move away from traditional approaches to decision making, the old tried and tested formats. We need to be aware that children cannot sit in meetings for hours, and that they need to express themselves in a variety of ways. (Female key informant, NGO worker)

Capacity building should therefore be a priority for adults who will interact with children in the advocacy debate. Stakeholders need to develop specific communications skills to dialogue with children and implement integrated approaches to incorporate children into public debate, including mechanisms to integrate children’s input into advocacy processes. Children involved in child-focused participatory programmes often surprise adults with their perceptions and ideas and when adults interact with them, decision-makers can gain a better understanding of children’s capacities, value their contribution and their abilities to make things happen.⁵⁰

6.4.2 Supportive approaches

6.4.2.1 Appropriate initiatives that are sensitive to boys and girls’ abilities

Respondents indicate that the opportunities that children have to participate in advocacy debate are closely connected to the children’s abilities to participate, which need to be intentionally developed in order to provide children with the life skills required to meaningfully participate in advocacy and practice.



The things that we need to learn to have more space to participate in decisions are: develop a stronger personality, more confidence, better public speaking skills, and how children can influence others by speaking. (Boy, aged 16)

The studies show that despite the fact that children develop good life skills through their active participation and engagement in capacity building events, the respondents point out that it is essential to continue to work in developing high-quality methodologies to assist more children to improve their social skills. These methodologies should promote an active learning process that helps them to improve aspects of their personalities.

When I joined the Children's Council I was very shy. I was embarrassed to say my name but I changed. I attended many training to learn how to speak in public, how to write a letter and reports, how to be a leader in my community. When I think about everything we have learned I feel proud and privileged. This also helped me at school; I am now a better and more confident student. (Girl, aged 13)

There appears to be a strong relationship between the capability of children to make decisions and take actions, and the manner programmes are structured. Many of these programmes do not consider the level of autonomy and maturity of participants, and as a result a child aged 9 is treated in the same way as a young person aged 16. Furthermore, a criterion that is only based on age might be a wrong approach as it can create an artificial division on children's ability to participate in decision-making processes since the right to express a view has no age threshold.⁵¹

Therefore, when a particular group of children is provided with the space, tools and knowledge to participate according to their experience, the likelihood that they will succeed is higher: "the capacity starts by giving them the skills, empowering them with skills and abilities."⁵² This is consistent with studies that show that when children feel respected by adults and their peers, they become more confident and motivated, and are able to understand other perspectives.⁵³

The most important thing is to learn how to speak in public. It is also important to develop our personality, to know how to get information, how to conduct our own research, and learn about leadership skills. (Girl, aged 16)



6.4.2.2 Ownership and responsibility

Children, due to their optimism and creativity, can naturally play an influential role in campaigning for children's well-being, so long as they feel a sense of ownership and personal responsibility in their work within their grouping.⁵⁴ Children have the eagerness and abilities to participate in public debate but they want to be consulted and want to make their own decisions about their level of engagement.

According to the studies, children appear to be eager to participate in debating advocacy on the issues that matter to them. However, it is critical to consult with them on the activities they are going to be engaged in, in order to make their participation genuine and meaningful and to ensure that they have autonomy to choose the topics in which they will be involved, especially themes of general interest and social justice.

6.4.2.3 Activities that are relevant for boys and girls

Exploring new approaches to participation where children can be actively engaged in activities that are relevant to them is a key theme according to the studies. Child participation should drive the changes that children want to make in their family, community or country, as well as reflecting positive changes to their personal development, and help them reach their full potential. The studies indicate that through the process of participation, children are empowered to take greater responsibility for the exercise of their own rights, as they gain confidence and competence to make informed choices.⁵⁵

In order to succeed with child participation, it appears to be important to assess what children really want to do and what they get the most joy from. It is important to give children different options of activities so they can freely choose the modules they want to join in, and to use their energy in positive, creative and stimulating activities. It is crucial to make efforts to identify qualities or areas in which children excel and to explore those that need to be developed or improved.

The most important abilities are to build a strong personality, not be afraid, believe that we can do things, learn how to speak up, learn about teamwork, and learn how to have a plan to influence others. (Boy, aged 17)



6.4.2.4 Inclusive strategies

The studies indicate that children are keen to engage with civil society groups in order to influence many aspects of the society and government, both at the local and national levels. All groups appear to agree that it is essential to have an inclusive strategy to reach as many children as possible in order to make their voices stronger. Studies show that much of the current practice in child participation fails to include certain groups of children, including those who are already disadvantaged.⁵⁶

It is pivotal to develop participatory strategies and methodologies to provide children with appropriate guidance that are sensitive to children's abilities. It is critical that these strategies should acknowledge that childhood is not a single, fixed and universal experience.⁵⁷ Children learn, interact and participate in different ways according to their culture, gender, ethnicity and maturity.

The lack of equal opportunity to participate appears to be influenced more by external factors and limitations rather than a lack of interest of children in joining groups, associations or initiatives. This is consistent with scholars that point out that children are more able to participate if they are viewed as competent learners and given the opportunity to learn in partnership with others.⁵⁸

There is a need to create more spaces to reach those who cannot join the project. They maybe do not know how to join our group, maybe their parents do not understand the activities and because of this they do not allow their children to join us. (Girl, aged 14)

Gender balance can be carefully planned and managed by including the voices of girls and boys, and also including the voices of vulnerable children such as working or street children. However one potential gap is the lack of strategies for including children with disabilities. One exception to the lack of representation of children with disabilities was a section in a children's report to the UPR where children raised awareness about the difficulties faced by children with disabilities to participate in community development processes and to gain access to the school system.⁵⁹

A range of potential solutions to strengthen inclusive child participation programme was identified by the respondents such as developing creative solutions to barriers, in order to encourage all children to be included. For example, some children need to be encouraged through specific activities, developing their life skills and building inclusive approaches that ensure everyone's benefits. Other children require environments that address inequality, imbalances of power and vulnerabilities.

6.4.2.5 Developing leadership skills

Participants in the studies indicate that it is very important to build leadership skills in children with the aim of providing them with encouragement, empowerment and opportunities to develop their social skills, and to equip them with tools to play a more active role in their communities. Through the skills acquired in training sessions, children were able to undertake leadership roles, become more independent and make decision about their engagement. Respondents indicated that children, through their participation in several public debate initiatives, were able to build their self-esteem, self-respect and self-reliance.

A report reviewed revealed that previous experiences with the Children's Council have proved that one of the best ways of building confidence in children is creating spaces for learning and fun where children can interact socially with others using music, dance, painting and writing to express their viewpoints.⁶⁰

6.4.3 Addressing limitations in the external environment

The studies indicate that meaningful child participation is linked to adequate resources, capacity building and awareness raising. Adults and stakeholders needed clarity of the concept and implications of child participation at all levels of society, from family to local and national levels. This is in line with WV Child Participation Guideline No.1, which states that part of meaningful child participation is the sensitisation of adults to the purpose and benefits of child participation and child expression. From a children's perspective, the studies indicate that more spaces are needed in order to ensure that children are able to express their aspirations, needs and opinions on issues that are relevant to them. Indeed, there appears to be a real need to include more children in the children's council to become more effective, and to conduct more awareness-raising activities about the importance of embracing children's voices in decision-making.

We need to invite more children to learn about leadership skills and give them a space to participate. We need to explain to teachers that it is important to give opportunities to children to express their opinion. They need to change violence for dialogue. With government people, I do not know if they will listen to us, but we should always try. We can write letters and produce videos and send these materials to them. (Boy, aged 17)

In order to address restrictions to child participation in public arenas, the following two critical external barriers were identified as:

- Limited spaces for children to influence advocacy.
- Lack of political will to respect children's participatory rights.

Space is connected to the concept of civic engagement. This is defined as the collective action of people to engage on issues that affect their lives and their involvement to seek to influence public processes.⁶¹ When children are excluded from this space, there is a risk that part of the equation will be missed and may result in more inequality. Children should be provided with the space to express their ideas and interact with decision-makers in order to achieve collective impact on issues that matter to them.

I think that we have learned many things about child rights and participation but when we go to real life nothing has changed, everything is the same, and people even do not know anything about children's rights. (Girl, aged 16)

The lack of political will should be addressed by developing mechanisms to ensure adequate channels of representation to include children as any other actors in society.⁶² In order to achieve this, the studies indicate that well-designed child-friendly social accountability tools are effective approaches to bringing children's views to the public debate and ensuring the inclusion of issues that children want to address.



6.4.3.1 Agreed mechanisms and strategies to include boys and girls' voices

One of the limitations that members of the Children's Council face is lack of mechanisms and strategies of the government of Lebanon to ensure that children's voices are heard in the advocacy debate. This is at both local and national level. In Lebanon, the political system in the country and the adult resistance to accept children as credible actors in the advocacy discussion are the major constraints, and this would mean changing the mind-set of decision makers and advocacy advisors.

While there are difficulties in ensuring that child participation is enshrined in the public decision-making process, the lack of mechanisms at government level should not prevent children from participating and it will require the use of more innovative methods to influence decision-making processes.



I am proud of the Children's Council. We wrote a report and sent it to the United Nations and this report highlights the situation of children in Lebanon and all the problems that they face. We are sure that the UN will listen to us and take this matter into consideration. (Girl, aged 14)

Despite the current limitation, some of the respondents acknowledged that there are some examples of good practices for including children in advocacy. Currently there appear to be more chances to participate in initiatives to influence advocacy than before and NGOs and organisations have provided unique opportunities for children to do so.

Success in the initiatives like the UN Universal Periodic Review, the campaign against child labour and economic exploitation, and children's engagement in the post-2015 process relies on having active participation of children in designing the activities and ensuring that they truly feel that there will be some positive change in their community or country. According to the studies, the children indicated that everything they have done is something that they have enjoyed, and that they feel proud to be part of that initiative. "We participated in many different ways; we have written books, we produced songs, and we did games to collect information about children's rights" (Girl, aged 16)

In the studies, children indicated that they want to have more opportunities to take action for their responsibilities in the society and be more active and productive social actors. In order to achieve that, they need to be provided with more spaces and opportunities to promote positive social change in their communities. Children want to use their participatory rights to make their opinions known, and to influence the results of certain policies.⁶³

It is very important to have small achievements. If we start doing something big, it will be more difficult to do it. We need to do things that are practical, not theoretical. Children like action. We can use theatre, play and drama to educate people with authority. We can do a play and invite them, so through the play they can understand what children want to say. (Boy, aged 17)

Respondents point out that there is increasing recognition of the importance of giving children opportunities to become advocates for child rights beyond their communities, so that they can influence the national arena. Even when there is no formal mechanism at the national level, the studies indicate that children still can be involved in decision-making by influencing global decisions, for instance through treaty reporting processes and social accountability mechanisms.

Key elements that emerged from above are that the inclusion of children in advocacy work requires to challenge traditional practices and attitudes that exclude them from decision-making.⁶⁴ It is crucial to develop mechanisms to ensure adequate channels of representation, and give children opportunities to shape their projects to their own needs and priorities. Well-designed child-friendly participatory programmes and tools are effective approaches to bringing children's views to the public debate and contribute to addressing the children's rights issues that children and young people want to raise.



The practice of child participation has been analysed in its relationship with advocacy initiatives, as a broader context that enable boys and girls to participate in the public arena, and particularly the use participatory and child-led methodologies to influence decision-making. This study has shown in line with several researchers that children are active and competent social actors who are keen to participate in advocacy and public debate, and they have the abilities to get involved at the community, national and global levels in seeking a change. Some of the main conclusions we can draw from the study:

- Children are keen to participate in public debates and get involved from the community to the national levels in advocating influence peers, community members and stakeholders, despite the restrictions that affect their ability to meaningfully participate.
- Children are able to produce changes in their own lives and in the lives of other children by changing the mind-set of their peers, community members and high-level stakeholders and decision-makers on issues that are relevant to them.
- Children experience severe disadvantages in terms of their participation in decision-making processes, especially those who are most vulnerable, due to cultural barriers, traditional patriarchal values, gender imbalance, age-based discrimination and the lack of a political system that ensures access to the public arena.
- Child participation requires significant cultural changes for it to be effective, child participation itself can also contribute to changes in the mind-sets of people and the cultural values of a community.
- Successful inclusion of child participation in the governance structures requires linking all high-level governance work to grassroots initiatives where children can feel that they are able to contribute to governance debate and influence substantial changes within the social justice process.
- Regular and meaningful dialogue and communication among children and stakeholders are critical to reducing the gap between the contexts and minimising the tensions between the right to participate, as an ideological standpoint, and the cultural values that perceive participation as an alien concept that undermines the structure of the family and community.
- It is critical to strengthen the coordination between the initiatives conducted at the household, community, municipal and national levels.
- It is important to assist stakeholders, decision-makers and child participation practitioners in developing better practices to ensure that stakeholders recognise that children are competent social actors and are active players in their families and communities.



The recommendations outlined in this section are based on the findings, contributions from children and practitioners, and the review of current literature. These are divided into two groups: (1) Systems and Structures, and (2) Approaches and Practices. These recommendations have been developed to inform new programmes and strategies in World Vision Lebanon; however, they are designed to contribute to broader worldwide initiatives.

Systems and Structures

1. Develop organisational policies that are informed by the UNCRC and reflect the concept of children as rights-holders who are entitled to actively participate in decision-making processes on issues that are relevant to them.
2. Embed child participation as an integral component of the organisation programmatic interventions and allocate adequate resources to ensure sustainability.
3. Support the shift of attitudinal and cultural processes away from perceiving children as passive subjects of protection to an approach that recognises children as social actors with the ability to influence the outcomes of decisions as well as produce changes in their own lives and the lives of others.
4. Work with families and local communities to change the social norms and attitudes towards children, so that parents and caregivers are more open to meaningful participation of children within the family and in the community.
5. Promote the establishment of formal or informal structures for child participation, creating a space for children to form a collective and representative voice in influencing decision-making processes.
6. Include different levels of child participation in governance structures using an intergenerational dialogue approach as an effective method to build interdependent and collaborative relationships between children and adults.

Approaches and Practices

7. Design inclusive child participation programmes employing a non-discriminatory approach that: 1) provides equal opportunities for girls and boys to participate, 2) allows for sensitivity to different ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds, and 3) can be contextualised to different abilities.
8. Embrace a gender-transformative approach in order of moving away from a representational concept of gender to one that ensures equitable outcomes.
9. Ensure that child participation programmes adhere to high-level child protection standards, recognising at the same time that children are articulate social actors who can actively contribute to their own protection when empowered to do so.
10. Always involve children when shaping the direction of programmes acknowledging the fact that children are more than capable of contributing their unique point of view and first-hand experiences. This enriches programming and results in better planning of the activities they engage in.
11. Develop capacity building programmes for staff members as well as decision-making/social justice-making institutions to equip them with the skills, tools and knowledge required to work with children in a professional, sensitive and appropriate manner.
12. Allow for flexible planning, particularly around schedules, to ensure that children have access to child-friendly activities as well as an environment for playing, learning and interacting with other children.
13. Produce child-friendly resources explaining the impact of policies in a way that enables children to make the link between the advocacy and their lives.
14. Ensure accountability to children who participate in projects by giving feedback on the impact and challenges of previous projects.



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Theory of Change

Children’s Council: Empowered and Connected World Vision Lebanon

