

Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation



# CHILDREN AS ACTIVE CITIZENS

COMMITMENTS AND OBLIGATIONS FOR  
CHILDREN'S CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIC  
ENGAGEMENT IN EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

*Children as Active Citizens*

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# INTRODUCTION TO CHILDREN\* AS ACTIVE CITIZENS



## What is citizenship?

**Citizenship is the collection of rights and responsibilities that define members of a community.** Citizenship includes individual rights, and responsibilities of individuals towards family, community and society.

**Citizenship consists of two aspects: citizenship rights and citizenship practice.** Citizenship rights include civil, social, economic and political rights. Citizenship practice is the active exercise of rights through democratic action and civic responsibility.

### Main citizenship rights

#### **Civil rights and individual freedoms**

- Freedom of movement
- Protection of privacy
- Freedom of speech, thought and religion
- Right to information
- Right to justice
- Right to equality and non-discrimination
- Right to name and nationality
- Freedom of association and assembly

#### **Social rights**

- Right to education
- Right to life and security

#### **Economic rights**

- Right to own property
- Right to conclude valid contracts
- Right to minimum of economic welfare

#### **Political rights**

- Right to vote
- Right to stand for political office

### Citizenship practice

- Social responsibility
- Volunteering and mutual help
- Acquiring an education
- Civic education
- Active use of the media
- Knowing the laws and legal literacy
- Demanding justice
- Demanding government accountability
- Citizen campaigns
- Civil rights movements
- Voting

\* Children are human beings ages 0 to 17 years.

## Children are citizens now!

**All children are born with rights.** Children's citizenship does not depend on their future contributions to society. Children's ability to exercise their citizenship rights and responsibilities evolves as they grow and learn. They have a strong interest in their society's development.

**The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes children's civil rights.** All children are entitled to the rights to name and identity, information, expression, association, justice and non-discrimination. In practice, however, children's civil rights and freedoms are often severely restricted.

**The denial of children's civil rights contributes to their abuse, exploitation and marginalization.** Promoting and protecting civil rights leads to a more just society where all people, including children, have the potential to make important contributions and to enjoy their social and economic rights.

**Children are largely denied formal political rights.** Despite these restrictions, children are taking part in political actions, movements and campaigns.

**Children are denied economic rights,** such as the right to sign contracts or own property. This may limit children's economic opportunities and make them more vulnerable to exploitation.

**Competence as a citizen is not limited to adults.** People do not suddenly become responsible citizens upon reaching a certain age. Legal age definitions are arbitrary, and do not reflect the range of children's capacities. They vary according to circumstances.

**Citizenship must be learned.** Citizenship is learned through everyday experiences of family and community life, education, civic and political awareness. Children are making important contributions to their societies. The more they are involved in public affairs the more they learn and develop as citizens.

## Why have children's citizenship rights been neglected?

Children's civil rights are much less understood than the rights to health and survival, education and development, and protection. Cultural barriers and adult resistance play a part. Adults may regard children's participation as a challenge to their authority. Children's participation is often tokenistic, limited in scope and does not lead to real change in children's situations. Promoting children as active citizens can have real benefits to society.

## Benefits to society of recognizing and promoting children as active citizens

- Children are able to make important contributions at home, in school, in the community and in the media.
- Children who learn and practice citizenship rights and responsibilities tend to become adults who are active citizens who exercise their rights and responsibilities.
- Investing in well-informed, aware and educated citizens has benefits for economic growth. A smarter workforce is a stronger workforce. A stronger workforce produces a stronger economy. A stronger economy reduces poverty.
- Active citizenship builds trust, responsibility and reduces violence.
- Children with access to information about health and sexuality are better able to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies, sexually-transmitted infections and HIV.
- Children in institutions are less likely to be abused if they can express their views and have access to effective complaints mechanisms.
- Child workers who form or join associations are better able to protect themselves from exploitation and abuse.
- Opportunities for productive civic engagement can reduce young people's frustrations and strengthen positive social behaviours.

## What government can do

- Implement the Convention of the Rights of the Child.
- Remove legal and regulatory barriers to children's civil rights and active participation in public affairs.
- Register all children at birth.
- Ensure all children have access to education, health care and other essential services.
- Provide all children with access to information and effective complaints mechanisms.
- Listen to children. Establish formal mechanisms that enable children to express their opinions, especially on matters that affect their daily lives and their future.
- Teach children about active citizenship rights and responsibilities.
- Ensure that children have access to justice and that special measures are in place to protect children in the justice system.
- Set indicators and benchmarks for children's active citizenship and monitor progress.

# BIRTH AND CIVIL REGISTRATION



## What is it?

Birth registration is the official recording of a child's birth by a government department. It is part of civil registration – a system which records the major events in people's lives from birth to death. An effective civil registration system is universal, compulsory, free of charge, accessible and confidential.

***All children should be registered.*** A child's name, sex, date and place of birth, and, to the extent possible, parents' names should be officially recorded.

***Everyone has a right to an identity and to registration.*** Older children who were not registered at birth still have a right to identity and registration. It should be a priority to include older children and unregistered adults in the civil registration system.

***Governments should register children of migrants, refugees and minorities.*** Birth registration is the first step in preventing statelessness, and should be done for all children, at birth, regardless of their parents' status of citizenship, race, language, or ethnic group. Without this record, it may be impossible to determine the nationality of a person for their entire lives.

***Birth registration is not the same as nationality.*** All children should be registered at birth – regardless of the nationality of their parents. This includes the children of stateless parents. The civil registration of births is separate from the determination of nationality and should not be confused with the right to naturalization. The nationality of a child is determined by the law of nationality of the place of birth and/or of the country of origin of the parents.

## Why it is important

Birth registration establishes formal proof of a child's name, existence and age. This proof can help protect the child against early marriage, under-age recruitment into the armed forces, child labour and trafficking. Proof of age can protect adolescents from being tried and sentenced as adults. Birth registration may be required for children to access health care, education and other social services.



## Benefits to Society

### ***Equal access to services***

- Birth registration contributes to poverty eradication by facilitating access to education, health care and other services.
- It contributes to gender equality, reinforcing equal treatment of girls and boys.

### ***Protection***

- Birth registration establishes a girl's identity and age and can help prevent trafficking, child marriage and teenage pregnancies.
- The proof of a child's age may protect children against child labour and recruitment into the armed forces.
- It protects children against prosecution and sentencing as adults.

### ***Economic benefits***

- A strong economy is built on an educated workforce. Registration facilitates access to education.

### ***National planning***

- An effective civil registration system provides accurate population data for the efficient allocation of public resources.

## What government can do

- Register every child immediately after birth.
- Register older children who were not registered at birth.
- Register all children, including those of refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons without discrimination of any kind, whether on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.
- Make birth and civil registration free of charge.
- Make registration easy in terms of physical access, language and professional attitudes of registration officials.
- Raise awareness among parents and community members about the importance of timely registration of births.
- Ensure all children are issued their birth certificates.
- Develop complementary systems to protect children from abuse and exploitation.

# EXPRESSION OF OPINION AND INVOLVEMENT IN DECISIONS



The right to expression of opinion is a fundamental right from the moment of birth. It is not earned or granted at a certain age.

***All children have the right to express themselves.*** This right is universal. It applies equally to girls and boys. It applies to children of minorities, migrants and refugees.

***Adults must learn to listen.*** In some societies, adults expect children to be seen and not heard. But children often have valuable and important information and opinions. These are lost or wasted if adults do not listen.

***Children have a right to take part in decisions about their lives.*** Children's views and concerns must be listened to and taken into account on any matter that affects them.

***The more important the decision, the more important it is that children participate.*** Children should be involved in decisions regarding their education, health care and families. It is especially important that children are involved in decisions regarding placement in alternative care, adoption processes, immigration and asylum procedures.

***Children's rights to resources have to be ensured and protected.*** Children who earn a living have a right to their earnings. Children's inheritance rights have to be protected from theft by adults.

## Why it is important

Children who are encouraged to express their opinions learn to take responsibility and become better at making decisions. Children who are encouraged to ask questions are more likely to develop the ability for critical thinking. These are important qualities of good citizenship.

## Benefits to society

- Children who are encouraged to express their opinions develop decision making and critical thinking skills, which improves their academic performance. These qualities help them make better decisions as adults, concerning themselves, their family, community and society.

- Better academic results lead to greater employability, higher earnings and a higher-quality workforce.
- Better interpersonal communication helps develop non-violent forms of solving conflicts. Less violence leads to more harmonious communities and stronger nations.
- Children who participate in decisions about their lives, tend to become more active citizens as adults. They participate more in decisions affecting their communities and societies.
- Government services are more effective and less wasteful if they are informed by children's opinions and concerns.

### What government can do

- Promote active learning and teaching methods in education.
- Develop children's decision-making skills in schools and other institutions through mandated management committees, student councils and other participatory decision-making mechanisms.
- Develop capacities of teachers, health workers, social workers and other professionals to communicate with children and to involve children in decisions.
- Review legal and administrative procedures to ensure children's involvement in important decisions, such as custody, adoption, school, marriage, juvenile justice and institutional care.
- Raise awareness among adults and children about children's right to express their opinions.
- Promote parenting education and respect for children.

# ACCESS TO INFORMATION



Access to information is a basic civil right that has major implications for children's development, survival, protection and participation.

Information has to be not just available, but ACCESSIBLE to all children. It must be free or affordable. It must be children-friendly and presented in formats that children can understand.

***Access to information must be EQUALLY available to all children.*** Special efforts are needed to ensure information is available in all languages spoken by ethnic minority, migrant and refugee children. Illiterate children require information through visual or oral media. Blind children need information in Braille.

***Children can't protect themselves if they don't know how.*** Access to information is sometimes blocked by adults who are concerned with protecting children from harmful content. This is a legitimate concern in respect to certain issues, such as violence or pornography. But children are often denied access to vital information they need to protect themselves. This is especially true in matters of health and safety.

***Access to information on sexuality does not lead to sex.*** Over 400 studies from around the world show that providing sex education to children does not result in children rushing out to have sex. In fact, studies show it tends to delay the start of sexual activity, and therefore avoids many of the problems that can arise when young people don't have enough information to make mature and responsible decisions.

## Why it is important

Well-informed children are better able to protect themselves from exploitation, abuse and violence. Children who have access to information about health, water and sanitation are more likely to survive. Knowledge makes children's opinions more informed and their decisions more sound and responsible.

## Benefits to society

- Children are more likely to survive, and even help others, during accidents and disasters if they have access to information on safety and emergencies.
- Sexually-transmitted infections and HIV are easier to prevent when children have access to information about drug use, sexuality and HIV and AIDS.
- Unwanted pregnancies among adolescents can be reduced if they have access to sex education.
- Trafficking and exploitation can be reduced if migrant children have access to information about safe migration routes, work opportunities and sources of support during migration.
- Street and working children are better able to protect themselves if they have access to information on how to avoid abuse, exploitation and violence and where to get assistance.

## What government can do

- Ensure that legislation, policies and government services promote children's right to information.
- Provide compulsory and free education for all children.
- Ensure information is available in formats that are non-discriminatory and appropriate for children of different ages and backgrounds.
- Involve children in the development of information materials on matters that affect them.
- Encourage the development of guidelines for the protection of children from information and material harmful to their health and well-being.

# COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS



***Mechanisms to respond to complaints and grievances expressed by children are essential.*** Mechanisms that respond to children – such as complaints boxes, telephone hotlines, guidance counsellors or grievance committees – protect children and teach them that expressing themselves can have positive results.

***Without complaints mechanisms children are at increased risk of abuse and exploitation.*** Complaints mechanisms allow children to seek support. Without them, the perpetrators of violence against children can continue to abuse children without fear of detection or prosecution.

***Effective complaints mechanisms must be linked to counselling, support and referral systems.*** Without appropriate follow up, problems won't be solved. Children will lose trust and faith in adults.

***Complaints mechanisms are especially important for children in institutions and in emergency and conflict situations.*** Relief agencies are beginning to address this issue as part of their emergency response.

## Why it is important

A child in trouble or distress can't get help unless there is a way for the child to make her situation or problem known. Adults who don't listen to children may lose valuable information that affects their children, themselves and their communities.

## Benefits to society

- Education, health and social welfare services are more effective if they are informed by the views and concerns of children.
- Children learn to trust and believe in adults and government when they see their complaints are being heard and responded to.
- The welfare of children is improved when adults are aware of children in difficulties.
- Breaking the cycle of abuse lowers the risk that children become abusers as adults.

## What government can do

- Establish and support safe, confidential and accessible mechanisms (such as child helplines) through which children can report abuse, speak to a trained counsellor in confidence and ask for support and advice without fear of reprisals.
- Nominate a children's ombudsperson to ensure effective response and follow-up to children's complaints and violations of their rights.
- Ensure all schools and other children's institutions have effective complaints mechanisms for children. This includes prisons, correctional facilities and alternative care settings.
- Ensure health services and other government services have accessible complaints systems for children.
- Define and enforce minimum standards of care and protection of children in all institutions and settings dealing with children.

# JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN



Justice for children involves more than juvenile offenders caught up in the legal system. It means children are able to use the justice system to claim their rights. It includes children as witnesses and plaintiffs (victims) in any judicial proceedings affecting children.

***Children who are able to claim their rights through the justice system learn to respect the rule of law.*** Mechanisms must be established to make the justice system accessible to children who have been abused and neglected (even by their own families), are victims of violence, forced to become child soldiers or have been cheated out of their inheritance.

***Children have the same rights to justice as adults.*** These include the right to legal representation, the right to remain silent and the right to be informed about charges brought against them. In addition:

***Courts must be adapted to enable children to participate in the justice system.*** Aspects of a trial which may frighten a child should be conducted in a way that considers the welfare of the child without affecting the rights of the accused. Videotaping testimony is one such way. Child victims should receive psychosocial support. Their anonymity must be maintained. The UN Guidelines on Justice in Matters Involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crimes provides detailed guidance.

## Why it is important

Providing justice for all is one of the most basic and important responsibilities of government. Some people who exploit, abuse, commit violence or cheat children do so partly because children are often unable to claim their rights through the justice system. Children who are denied justice will likely grow up alienated and with no faith in laws or government. They will be more likely to solve conflicts through violence rather than legal means.



## Benefits to society

- An effective and fair justice system and effective protection mechanisms promote respect for the law among children.
- A justice system that protects children will help deter crimes against children.
- Children-friendly justice procedures improve the quality and reliability of children's testimonies. A child who is frightened, feels threatened or does not understand the legal proceedings may be a less reliable witness and may be denied access to justice.
- Providing justice for children shows that a society is treating all of its citizens equally.

## What government can do

- Reform the legislative framework to ensure children's legal empowerment and to change discriminatory laws and regulations.
- Provide children-sensitive justice procedures, including legal aid services, court procedures and community-based diversion as alternative to prison sentences.
- Create opportunities for children to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings that affect them.
- Train professionals working with children in the justice system to communicate and consult with children. This includes judges, probation officers, police and prison officers.
- Produce and disseminate legal information for all children in accessible and understandable forms.
- Link efforts to promote justice for children to broader efforts to promote access to justice in society.

# CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMPETENCIES OF CITIZENS



Civic engagement gives children opportunities to be educators, volunteers, activists and advocates. It gives children responsibilities and opportunities to practice choice, decision making and independence. It provides children with skills and experiences to make successful transitions to adulthood.

***Children's competencies for citizenship can be developed at home, in school, in youth groups and in the community.*** Schools are not the only place where citizenship skills can be built. Parents and communities also have roles to play.

***Civic engagement teaches children to use their potential for positive action.*** It can help prevent risky behaviours, and re-engages children who are out of school or are unemployed. This includes programmes that rehabilitate young offenders.

***Civic engagement prepares children to take constructive approaches to problems.*** Children need to be involved actively rather than just being told what to do. Children whose experiences are grounded in their own actions are able to speak with confidence.

***Civic engagement provides opportunities for leadership***

## Forms of civic engagement

**Youth service:** Youth service includes various forms of volunteering and community service. Some countries have national youth service programmes. Youth organizations, such as the Scouts, the Girl Guides and the young Red Cross volunteers, organize children to make positive contributions to society.

**Peer education** can involve children in HIV prevention education and promote good practices in health, water and sanitation, and other areas.

**Social entrepreneurship** and leadership programmes support children and young people to mobilize others to tackle social problems.

**Service learning** offers students work opportunities in communities or businesses while still in school.

**Child activists:** Some agencies support children to become social activists, for example to confront corruption in society.

## Benefits of civic engagement

- Develops respect for the environment and promotes sustainable development.
- Develops responsibilities for community life and citizenship.
- Strengthens respect for human rights, democracy and justice.
- Promotes legal literacy and the rule of law.
- Promotes tolerance of others, gender equality, equality of ethnic and religious groups, persons with disabilities, people with different sexual orientations and people living with HIV and AIDS.

## What government can do

- Establish mechanisms, such as school councils, for children to practice competencies for citizenship.
- Train teachers for citizenship education.
- Support parenting education for the next generation of parents.
- Remove legal and institutional obstacles to children's civic engagement.
- Ensure opportunities for civic engagement are accessible for all children, irrespective of age, sex, ethnicity and disability.

# CHILDREN AND THE MEDIA



Children are subjects, users or producers of media. The media are a powerful force in forming, influencing and changing public opinions and perceptions. This powerful force can be used for good.

***The media can project positive images of children and strengthen acceptance of children's rights.*** Children's involvement in the media as young journalists shows children as active citizens with their own views and opinions. This counteracts common media portrayals of children as helpless victims or passive recipients of adult benevolence.

***Young journalists show what children are capable of doing and what they have to say.*** Few social or civic movements can succeed without access to and coverage by the media. The media enable individuals or groups with important messages to engage with society.

***New media can overcome obstacles to children's participation as active citizens.*** Globally, digital media, such as the Internet, are rapidly becoming many children's preferred medium of communication. It is the most efficient tool for national and global participation on a large scale.

***Harness the digital revolution to support children's rights and civic engagement.*** The digital revolution does present challenges. Access to digital media is still low in some developing countries, but growing. Children may be exploited by cyber abusers. Some degree of regulation is necessary to protect children, as long as it is not used by adults to censor children's views.

## Why it is important

The power and influence of the media, both mainstream and digital, is growing. Rather than being just a source of entertainment, or reinforcing stereotypes and misconceptions, the media can be used to broaden knowledge, engage children with society and develop their citizenship skills.

## Benefits to society

- Engagement with the media builds essential competencies, such as learning about citizenship, social issues and politics, life skills and livelihood skills.
- The media can link children with other children from marginalized communities, increasing understanding and solidarity.
- By using digital media, children are obtaining the skills and knowledge they will need in rapidly modernizing economies.
- Children's involvement in the media can raise awareness about children's issues and encourage constructive and creative solutions to problems children are facing.

## What government can do

- Offer training opportunities for children to develop media skills and critical media literacy.
- Recognize that independent media are fundamental to the pursuit of democracy and freedom and that censorship and control are opposed to the best interests of both children and adults.
- Create an effective and secure environment in which the media can work professionally and independently.
- Explore ways in which support can be given to media initiatives aimed at providing greater access to children, serving their needs and promoting their rights.
- Support the creation of space and opportunities for children to use print media, radio and television to communicate their views. Children should be able to hear, see and express themselves, their culture, languages and life experiences through broadcast programmes that affirm their sense of self, community and place.
- Actively involve children in media to ensure that media content is relevant and appropriate.
- Increase children's access to and promote safe use of information and communications technologies (Internet, mobile phones).

# CHILDREN INFLUENCING PUBLIC DECISIONS



The vast majority of public decisions affecting children are made without considering their views or involving them. Much of the work of government and civil society is carried out without explicit recognition of children and young people. When children do participate, it is often tokenistic and not sustained, such as when children appear at conferences or public consultations.

***Public decisions that are informed by the views and concerns of young people lead to better policies and better services.*** Researching children's views produces more detailed information of the concerns of a wide variety of children than inviting a few children to high-level conferences.

***Build from the bottom up. Community-level decisions are the best starting point for building lasting mechanisms for children's participation.*** Recognizing and facilitating children's meaningful participation in public decision making helps build a better future for all of society.

National-level and international-level decisions are high-stakes, high-powered and can be heavily contested. These are difficult areas in which to start.

***Participating in public decisions teaches children about government, democracy and strengthens their sense of social responsibility.***

## Protecting children who participate in public decisions

The Convention on the Rights of the Child grants children freedom of expression, association and assembly. Children are entitled to join political parties and labour unions. However, many obstacles exist for children in influencing public decisions. There is a need to ensure that children who are involved in policies and politics are protected and are not exposed to violence and other unacceptable risks.

## Achieving children's influence over public decisions

Children's involvement in public decisions is best built from the bottom up.

- Research with children allows agencies to gather the views of large numbers of children and feeds children's concerns into public decisions. Minority, stateless and illiterate children should be included.
- Community-level planning can offer opportunities for involving children in decisions that affect them, such as the use of public spaces.
- Children's advisory boards consist of selected children who provide advice to adult organizations.
- Children's councils, committees and parliaments have been established in many countries. They have different meanings in different contexts. They should give children some real influence over important decisions, rather than being just debating clubs. Children's committees should start in schools and communities before being expanded to district, provincial and national levels.
- Internet-based consultations and video conferencing need to be used more as they offer new ways to consult large numbers of children. Electronic conferencing has to be combined with local-level consultations to include children who don't have access to the Internet.
- Children have been involved in promoting, monitoring and reporting the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This mobilizes children to raise awareness and to campaign for the implementation and enforcement of their rights.

## What government can do

- Create mechanisms and structures within government at local and national levels for children to be consulted and to have influence over public decisions and resource allocations.
- Ensure that policies are developed based on the views and concerns of all groups of children.
- Create opportunities for children to provide feedback on the quality, accessibility and appropriateness of public services by involving children in monitoring and social auditing.
- Ensure the protection and safety of children involved in public decision-making processes.

# CHILDREN-LED ASSOCIATIONS



The Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's rights to form and join associations. Involvement in associations helps children to develop skills for active civic engagement.

***Children-led associations can develop social awareness and organizational skills of children.*** Children-led associations can be clubs for extracurricular activities. But they can also be much more than that. They can be workers' unions, organizations to fight trafficking or provide peer outreach, and other associations that represent children's interests and aspirations.

***Children-led associations empower children.*** They give children a voice in their affairs and provide representation and strength in numbers. This can be especially effective in advocacy efforts.

***Adults must respect the ability of children to manage and control their own organizations.*** Children-led associations require some support from adults. This may lead to adults trying to control these organizations or set their agendas. Adults should not interfere.

## Why it is important

Children-led associations contribute to developing children's civic and leadership skills. They are especially important for developing the skills of marginalized children and giving them opportunities to express their views and to advocate for their rights. Marginalized children, such as working children, are often at the forefront of children-led associations.

Few countries have put in place the necessary policies and legislation to fully implement their commitments to children's right to association. Laws concerning the administration of organizations often prevent children from acting as directors or trustees of public associations.



## Benefits to society

- Children-led associations can foster democratic principles and skills among children.
- They can be effective in developing life skills, such as trust, communication, conflict resolution and team work.
- They give children a public voice, allowing society to become more aware of the problems, needs, desires and aspirations of children.
- They help protect children from abuse through strength in numbers.
- They help build the advocacy and leadership capacities of children.

## What government can do

- Reform legislation to promote children's associations
- Provide legal guarantees and a supportive environment for children's associations and their right to organize as citizens.
- In relation to children in employment, ensure there are no limits on the right of children to form and join trade unions.
- Membership of any organization has to be voluntary.
- Take special measures to promote the freedom of association of children with disabilities.

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*Knowing Children*

