

The Reaching In Approach

... to supporting child led participatory processes with children in marginalised or vulnerable situations

Background

There is [evidence](#) that some groups of children tend to be left out of local, national and international government decision-making. Even when children's ideas are listened to, often there is no sign of action or change as a result of what they have said. In some places, countries and organisations are trying to do better.

So, we have been experimenting with ways of reaching in to groups of children in the most marginalised situations and helping their concerns and wishes reach in to government decision making. In response to children's concerns and available opportunities, we have focused on children's concerns that relate to the [European Child Guarantee](#) – social exclusions and free early childhood education and care, free education (including school based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day), free healthcare, healthy nutrition, adequate housing. Some activities focus particularly on health.

This briefing tells you about what we have learned about achieving collaborative commissioning and shared leadership of inclusive, impactful and sustainable participatory processes.

We present what we have found out using the [Council of Europe process model](#) for thinking about participation (**prepare and plan; connect; prioritise; investigate; take action; follow up action; and evaluate and share**).

Who is involved with Reaching In?

The Reaching In network (hosted by the University of Central Lancashire and Eurochild) has been learning from professionals across 15 different countries in Europe. A reference group, involving in particular Roma-led organisations and Eurochild member organisations working with children in marginalised situations, met regularly to reflect on the challenges of engaging with groups of children in vulnerable situations.

We have been funding and evaluating pilot participatory processes with groups of children in Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Croatia and Bulgaria. Pilot projects received 4,000 -10,000 Euros, depending on contexts, goals and costs. The Evaluation is led by the University Pompeu Fabre/University of Barcelona. Funding was supplied by Open Society Foundations.

The groups include children who are Roma and children who have experience of alternative care or migration and asylum seeking. These children involved in the pilots are supported by organisations. Some children already had experience as activists, advocates and child rights defenders. Some groups of children had never come together before Reaching In, the organisations working with them are community based and had no previous experience of participatory processes with children or the children themselves had never heard of children's rights.

1. Prepare and Plan

Secure funding that children can direct the use of and identify:

- any restrictions on its use
- any ways the funding being made available is driven by adult/ institutional goals
- any benefits of working with particular sponsor organisations.

Collaborate (internationally if relevant) with children and professionals working with children in marginalised situations/ protected characteristics, to understand:

- Children's priority concerns arising from previous participatory work that could inform funding criteria

For example, we used an interactive website through which children and professionals can share evidence from activities in which children are voicing their concerns (see <https://cpip.ucanmakechange2.org>).

- Opportunities for influence (eg policy frameworks, events) that relate to children's known concerns and the funding available

For example, we identified that the EU Child Guarantee covered many priority areas for children and for our funders.

- Locations and groups of children who are likely to be excluded from existing participatory processes in this area of work
- Capacity building/opportunities for reflection that should be offered to support children or adults acting as facilitators.

For example, collective and international capacity building (such as online practice exchange seminars and practice exchange website) to identify strategies for overcoming barriers to children's participation in public decision-making.

Prepare:

- Information about the funding and criteria and opportunities for influence

For example, we prepared information about the funding being child-led. This stated that applications should show how children had been or would be involved in deciding 1) priority issues to look at within the broad area of the Child Guarantee and 2) the methods they use to express their own views or to investigate the ideas and experiences of other children.

- Inclusive, accessible, relevant and road tested summaries of relevant policy, developed in partnership with grassroots organisations to develop these materials so that they are.
- Accessible application forms

For example, we used the Council of Europe process framework to ask groups to tell us what they had done to prepare the application

- Reporting forms,
- Data sharing agreements, Contracts, Invoicing information/templates
- Evaluation plans (see step 7 for details)

2. Connect

Reach into target locations and communities by inviting expressions of interest through:

- Already existing child-led organisations
- Organisations already working directly with children through trusting relationships
- National and international networks working on children's rights
- Adult focused organisations with particular expertise in the area

Listen to their views about:

- Work already led by children
- Fears and risks
- Opportunities and Ambitions
- Organisational Experience (and share good practice on a public platform)

With children and/or their representatives, create a shared understand of what is possible and appropriate in terms of:

- Safe and ethical practice
- Building on existing participatory work with short term provision of additional funding

For example, one national organisation in Bulgaria decided it was best to work with children and young people already engaged, so that they could take greater leadership roles.

- starting a participatory process with the aim of securing longer term funding

For example, one community organisation in Barcelona decided it was possible for them to start participatory work with children, and to see how this might be sustained.

- building organisations' or children's capacity to lead future work
- building children's capacity to express an informed view in the area of concern, rather than just a requirement to voice views.

For example, before children chose the priority areas to focus on or the methods to use, many organisations ran workshops (sometimes chosen by children) so that children could get a taste of the issues (such as healthy living or ways of having dialogue with professionals)

- timescales that are culturally appropriate and logistically feasible for this work

Reach in to policymaking arenas to

- Link up with institutions, networks and individuals already active on these issues
- Identify processes through which children's views expressed through grassroots organisations can be fed into policy advocacy work or consultation feedback. • Advocate for or create processes where these do not exist.

With community and child led organisations who have expressed an interest, seek consensus on what it is a priority to fund in terms of:

- Which groups of children and organisations to fund and why.
- What sort of budget would enable them to conduct meaningful activities on any predetermined themes in the context and time available.

For example, if three organisations have expressed an interest and they all have capacity to deliver, a budget of 15,000 Euro can be divided to support children's advocacy activities over nine months in three organisations. But this may only enable impactful inclusion in government decision making if those organisations or children have already started to engage in collective participatory processes, not where this is completely new activity.

- Who they would choose as a local/national organisation to coordinate advocacy between groups of children involved.
- How decisions about funding will be taken if consensus is not achieved.

Steps 3 to 6 are essentially led by children and organisations that are identified for funding. However there are ways that the funder can contribute alongside the process direct by children and their organisations.

3. Prioritise

Enable children to be involved in deciding goals and activities by:

- Sending out accessible invitations for applications to organisations you intend to fund
- Providing accessible information about any policy area linked to the funding
- Establishing an advisory group with expertise in children's participation in government decision making and invite them to review applications
- Providing feedback on the applications from the advisory group where needs be

For example, to encourage a more explicit statement of how children have led/will lead process and to identify any predicted strategies for investigating views or taking action.

- Fund all applications that show a clear plan that meets any established goals.

Support organisations to deliver on children's priorities by:

- Signing a simple contract and data sharing agreement as quickly as possible
- Requesting invoices and providing at least 70% the grant up front
- Reminding groups of the freedom for children to lead within the limits of the funding.
- Reminding groups of the report format which will collect children's perspectives on the issues at hand.
- Providing local and individualised opportunities to reflect and learn (such as, a national network of professionals or one to one mentoring)

4. Investigate

Support organisations to enable children's leadership by:

- Reminding them that the goal is for children to make decisions on how the money is spent
- Providing spaces in which workers can reflect on their practice.

Support children to communicate their wishes and concerns by:

- Providing access to examples of previous activities which children have used (see cpip.ucanmakechange2.org) and advice on safe and ethical practice
For example, in one organisation, children were offered different creative activities as a means of expressing their views. They rejected some of these offered methods by not attending or not engaging. Some children developed their own methods to communicate what they wanted through ways of being in a space in response to opportunities, rather than by putting things into words.
- Reminding organisations of the reporting obligation – to create a report of children's wishes and concerns on any aspect of a chosen policy area – but not requiring that children vocalise or be recorded.

5. Take Action

Link organisations to *national* opportunities and networks to support action by:

- Identifying potential facilitating NGOs (with strong advocacy networks related to eg Roma/child rights issues)

For example, in one country we linked organisations to a facilitating NGO which was already active in advocacy work related to the Child Guarantee. In another country, we linked grassroots organisations to a facilitating NGO that already had a national profile.

- Asking potential facilitating organisations for proposals on how to bring together children and organisations to identify possible themes and opportunities for action
- Assessing these proposals with participating children and organisations, and funding activities that are chosen.

Link organisations to *international* opportunities to support action by:

- Making sure that the reporting form we use gives enough detail of the policy area.

For example, in relation to the Child Guarantee, reminding organisations of the content using an infographic. And, in relation to each theme, asking: What did you find out about children's views? What are they experiencing? What do they want to see happening?

- Identifying international reports in which these perspectives could be included.
- Adjusting and readjusting the timescales for publication, including reissuing international comparative reports, so that these children's perspectives can be included.

6. Follow Up Action

Linking participation organisations into other opportunities for action by:

- Connecting participating organisations with other parts of the network.
- Supporting bilateral online exchanges between groups of children with similar interests.
- Using the finding about children's priority concerns to formulate indicators which can be used to monitor implementation of policies over the longer term.

Feeding back what has been done in response to children's views

- Providing feedback about how children's views have been included in international work.
- Ensuring this feedback addresses every point that has been reported to us.
- Providing extra feedback when additional action is taken with their views or where changes occur as a result of advocacy.

Step 7 is co-created with everyone involved. It actually starts at the beginning and runs alongside all of the steps above. It can be led by children, organisations or an external ally.

7. Evaluate and Share

Developing a shared understanding of what to evaluate by:

- As an international team, taking the learning from step 1 and 2 (Prepare, Plan and Connect) to create draft indicators for this programme.
- Summarising the learning from step 3 (Prioritise) regarding children's goals for their work, the context and potential challenges.
- Discussing and refining this information with all partners who have capacity to be involved, to create a shared understanding.

Developing a shared understanding of how to evaluate by:

- Thinking through who has what language skills and communication preferences and what will be most accessible to children.
- Considering what resource are available to support evaluation.
- Drafting and redrafting plans in discussion with organisations and children involved to create evaluation solutions that fit their contexts.
- Creating information, consent forms, safeguarding protocols (and ethical approvals).

Support organisations to collect and reflect on insights

- Sharing information, and consent and safeguarding protocols and talking through how to use these locally.
- Providing opportunities for ongoing reflection/practice exchange.
- Being alongside organisations to document the journey.
For example, embedding researchers doing photovoice, providing additional funding to the group itself so that they can document their process or visiting them when invited.
- Discussing learning at national levels, and co-authoring outputs with all partners who want to be involved.

Share advice and other learning

- Organising and hosting international online events so that children and organisations can showcase their work.
- Linking organisations into events and practice exchanges organised by other people.
- Creating an accessible and safe way of sharing practice on a website.