REACHING IN

Inclusion and Influence in Children's Participation

Introduction

Children's participation in political and democratic life is a central focus of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which also commits to fight poverty, promote inclusive and child-friendly societies, health and education systems by establishing the European Child Guarantee[i]. The Child Guarantee aims to secure access to basic services for vulnerable children, and commits to do so by involving relevant stakeholders, including children, in the preparation, implementation and monitoring of the National Action Plans.

This paper summaries what has been learned from a two-year study of inclusive approaches to children's participation in public decision-making. The study involved nine pilot projects with Roma community groups in two countries (Spain and Bulgaria), and with Eurochild members (in Croatia, Portugal and Belgium)[ii].

Our aim was to understand what can enable collaborative rather than consultative public participation of children at grassroots community level, including with children and communities who tend not to be reached by mainstream participation opportunities.

This position paper outlines:

1. **The nine Reaching In pilot projects**
2. **What we found out about inclusive participation**
3. **Recommendations for inclusive children's public participation in the EU.**

All pilots projects were linked to the issues of education and learning through sport, leisure or cultural activities, health and adequate nutrition or housing, which are addressed by the [European Child Guarantee.](#) Children's perspectives on what is needed at a local level to enable access to some of the provisions named in the Child Guarantee, are available in a separate policy paper.

By **participation in public decision-making** we mean how children's priorities and perspectives are included in decisions that are taken by community groups, municipalities, national and international governmental organisations. Sometimes this means direct participation, where children sit alongside adults in intergenerational groups and make decisions together about actions to take or how resources are directed. Sometimes, to use Lundy[iii]'s terms, this means how the concerns that children 'voice' are heard by a relevant 'audience' and then used to 'influence' a decision that adults take.

1. What were the nine Reaching In Pilot Projects?

The nine co-commissioned pilot projects, hosted by a range of different organisations, worked with Roma communities and with children and young people who have experience of asylum seeking or alternative care. Each project received 4.000-10.000 Euros (depending on timescale and geographical spread). They took place from April 2022 to November 2023 and each lasted between 3 and 12 months.

The nine projects involved **371 children and young people** aged 3-25. Many of these organisations and children had never had previous experience of participatory projects. Some had previous experience of youth-led participation or peer-to-peer education.

Despite our intentions, in their initiation and development, many of the pilot projects were more collaborative than child-led, but all organisations involved made step forwards in their capacities to facilitate children's and young people's leadership.

Spain – Catalonia

Catalonia 1, a Roma led organisation across the region with good links in schools and communities, worked with 54 children aged under 11 years in a school setting in a deprived area. At first, children were given information about children's rights and invited to reflect on which rights were more important for them. The children then decided that they wanted to focus their attention on raising understanding of their rights and they created a website with information for other children. In an extension to the project, children in two classes (which included children of 20 different nationalities) took part in an activity to reflect on the Child Guarantee and to create a game that would explain this policy to other children. Children from this group attended a meeting with the municipality and one Roma girl spoke about their concerns. As a result, the host organisation have adopted the Reaching In approach to participation in their work with 14-16 year olds to explore reasons for education drop out. The organisation also presented this model of participation at a Council of Europe meeting, and they have planned a demonstration at the City Hall, calling for the improvement of their neighbourhood.

Catalonia 2, a Roma/Gitana organisation worked with 17 girls aged 8-19, organised in two groups by age. Through links with parents and grandparents they reached out to bring two group of girls together – one for children and one for teenagers. The groups decided that reflecting on the health and having fun would be best achieved through traditional Flamenco dance. They also spent time talking about their wishes for the future. They succeeded in getting permission from the Civic Centre to use a community space. The strong connections between this grassroots organisation and the local community made it possible to have

informal conversations about health, daily routines, needs and how to encourage and enable girls' participation. During the activities the girls spoke about how the Flamenco promoted their health and they spoke of other aspirations. The formal meetings of the teenagers ended early, although they continued to meet and think about how to participate. The organisation itself now also has a better awareness of how to work in a participatory way with children, some of the girls have ambitions to meet with Roma political role models but no action was taken with the municipality. The organisation has also tried to open up access to the local library.

Catalonia 3, a faith-based Roma organisation that provides afterschool education worked with 44 boys and girls aged 8 to 15, mainly of Roma origin. Many of these children had experience of living in poverty. Reaching out through well-established links with families, they invited children and parents to a 'Health Gymkhana' in a park close to their community centre building. This activity (like a Discussion Carousel) offered children 15 minutes taster activities through which they could try out different activities as a way of talking about health. Learning from this Gymkhana, four activities were provided to the children (arts, dance, kickboxing and nutrition) and through these activities and informal conversations, the children expressed their views. They discussed personal issues and ideas for how to improve their neighbourhood. To share their views and experiences, they held a public closing event, inviting parents and other children and families as well as a local public administration representative and this was covered by local media. The leader of this organisation also used the children's concerns to advocate for the changes children had asked for and further funding was secured from the municipality to continue their activities.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria 1, Roma Health Mediators returned to work with a group of 15 girls aged 13-14 who had already been involved in an activity with them in a deprived part of Bulgaria. They connected to the girls through a local Roma health media who also runs a church. But first attempts at reconnecting were a little difficult, as the girls were now teenagers and their lives had moved on. After supporting some of the girls with personal issues, however, the group chose to meet regularly every two weeks at a coffee shop and to take part in discussions. The first aim had been to introduce them to all of the issues in the Child Guarantee, but this was not of interest to the group. Instead, they chose to reflect on personal issues and cultural prompts international women's day and the film Barak which introduced the girls to other cultures). Some of the personal concerns of the girls were taken forward in conversations with their families, and the girls made links with the mayor. He attended a cooking activity with them, agreed to continue funding their discussion group, and has expressed an interest in learning from them about how to improve the neighbourhood. The girls also took part in a questionnaire related to education policy,

prepared by a children's national participation group hosted by the National Network for Children. The girls are working on a letter to their municipality to say the things they would like to change in their schools and in their neighbourhoods.

Bulgaria 2, a prominent national organisation with a long history of peer-to-peer work engaged with 99 children. They consulted young leaders (aged 16-25) about how they would wish to use the Reaching in funds. Then 15 Roma children, selected from three locations, took part in a three-day capacity building training in three locations. This gave the participants the opportunity to discuss and identify the priority topics by themselves. Children decided to continue their work through two information and advocacy campaigns for promotion of quality education. In one of the projects, connecting over 50 children in two school settings, they realised there was high levels of school drop out. The young people identified the need for access to role models who could help them imagine success and different careers. So, they organised information sessions within the school, providing information about potential careers and starting a campaign with the slogan on mugs 'It's not shameful not to know. It's shameful not to study'. The goal is also to reach newly elected local municipality representatives with number of requests for better education policies and opportunities for vulnerable children.

Bulgaria 3, an established organisation working over the past 10 years with over 44,500 Roma young people, reviewed the feedback they had had from previous activities, they consulted with young advisors and volunteers, and they ran a questionnaire in schools. This showed that the main concerns children reported were hate speech and discrimination, and above all early marriages and school dropout. Based on the feedback, they decided to hold a National Roma Girls Camp event dedicated to these issues, to offer a safe space of reflection and to develop skills in self- advocacy. 25 young women (aged 15-21) attended the camp and spent time reflecting on these issues. Information about the camp was shared in education settings and young women sent an application letter explaining their motivations to attend. They heard from role models and they learned how to set personal goals and overcome challenges, how to advocate and how to mediate. After the camp, they received personal support, and sometimes conversations with their family members. They also established two advocacy campaigns focused on gender norms. This included one group making a video against early marriage and sharing it with teachers and boys in their school, to explain the pressures, the consequences and what would help. Five smaller campaigns including a photo story, silent theatre, theatre performance, movie and handmade books were also implemented by girls and boys throughout the project. One 10-minute professional video featuring highlights and messages from Roma girls against early marriages was produced to amplify the voices of these girls and ensure their advocacy messages are heard by a wider audience. The video has reached more than 3000 people.

Eurochild Members

In addition to one of the groups in Catalonia, which is a member of Eurochild, three further Eurochild pilot projects took place.

The pilot project in **Croatia** worked with 10 care experienced children aged 13-18 with the aim of enabling space and voice, providing mentoring to reflect on the Child Guarantee and engaging them in active participation for their rights. Some of the children involved also had experience of living in poverty, living with violence, living rurally or were Roma. The pilot connected to children through a foster care provider organisation. Children met online and face to face and used creative activities to discuss how to realise their rights in the context of alternative care. They decided to create an online space to provide information about rights for other children and to create a leaflet about rights within the Child Guarantee. This was distributed to government ministries and other policy makers. The impact of the manual on public decision-making is not yet known, but the children themselves report an improved awareness of their rights on how to take action. Decision-makers congratulated them on this activity but did not commit to any specific actions. However, the host organisation have adopted the Reaching In approach to participation in their work and have built stronger ties with the children's ombudsperson.

The pilot project in **Portugal** worked in eight children's homes with 100 children and young people aged over 4 years. They all had experience of alternative care, and some had experience of seeking asylum or being young carers. The aim was to understand how to improve house meetings so that they could become more democratic. Children in each home chose whether or not to attend the meetings, which were co-led by a facilitator and an experienced care leaver. Children expressed their ideas through formal and informal activities, involving verbal and non-verbal communication and facilitators tried to listen deeply to how and what they communicated. The children's views were fed back to their children's homes and fed into a report to a national committee on alternative care. The impact on some children's homes has been to create regular children in care forums, to involve children in more practical decisions (ex regarding meals) and to encourage the autonomy of teenagers, for example in managing their own money .

The pilot project in **Belgium** worked with 12 asylum seeking children and young people aged 13-18 in a school setting. There were challenges about working in a school setting which limited the amount of time they were allowed to have with young people. The young people were invited to take part in discussions about their rights and wishes and they were offered various different activities related to the Child Guarantee. The young people expressed their views about their education, about their futures and come of the barriers they were encountering. The organisation facilitating this work has learned how to adopt this more

participatory approach – as it was the first time the organisation had engaged young people in an open dialogue about rights. The young people expressed the wish to record their views in a video to share with EU decision-makers, however the school was unable to allow them time to take part in this.

2. What did we find out about inclusive participation?

In this section, we report what we learned in relation to the Council of Europe process model of children's participation[iv]: Prepare and plan, Connect, Identify Issues, Investigate views, Take action, Follow up action, and Evaluate and share.

Prepare and plan

Time is needed for organisations to decide to collaborate. In this study, most **organisations had established relationships** with the University of Central Lancashire, Eurochild or the national coordinating organisations, and it was because of these and personal recommendations that they got involved. They had confidence that it would be an empowering experience rather than a one-way process of extracting knowledge.

> 'At first I thought that's not part of our portfolio and after months later, I have received another email with an invitation. And I spoke with [someone we both know]….and she said it's a gorgeous program. It really fits what you're doing. You should attend the meeting. And after the meeting I thought yes!'

It was important for us together to **discuss what timescales and goals were feasible**, respecting the rhythms of families and communities' lives and the other commitments of organisations.

One organisation highlighted the importance of enabling children to be involved in the planning, as this was part of what made it work:

> 'the main reason that our project/process worked well is the fact that we included our children in every part and every form of the activities. We encouraged them to actively participate in the project …, but also in life in general on the topics that are close and familiar to them. We presented them with the idea of being "experts by experience" and with the idea to share that experience with as, but also with everyone else. We connected that with the process of empowerment of our participants which in the end resulted with a lot of their own ideas and higher level of willingness to participate in democratic life and their own communities.'

This need to be prepared to allow young people to take control of their own project was echoed in another organisation:

> *'it's very important to give them the freedom to do what they want to do, you know, to feel ownership of what is happening.'*

Connect

In almost all of the pilot projects, children were able to participate because there were **existing relationships between the host organization and children or with the families and communities**. This professional described where they were working:

> 'It is a small town... we have started work there in 2008 with the health mediators and they succeeded to build very good relationships ... 7-8 years after this starting point, we saw that when you focus the efforts continuously there are changes. Small ones... and that's why ... we selected this place.'

An inclusive approach to enabling children's participation in public decision-making must start with providing funding to organisations to enable them to invest in creating, maintaining and sustaining relationships with groups of children, families, communities and the institutions around them. These relationships in turn make change more feasible.

Connections between individuals and places were also significant. In many instances, the individual connecting with children was a charismatic leader with a strong reputation in the community. Or there was a community cultural centre, in which the leader was trusted by multiple generations within families. Sometimes these individual relationships were accessed through a trusted intermediary. For example, a local church leader, a Roma health mediator or a teacher. Professionals described this in practice:

> 'in many places we have these health mediators which are the bridge between the Community, especially in very marginalised communities ... You do not have access if you are without a local person from the community to bring you to this place'.

> 'We involved the homes caregivers, explaining the project. They also involved the school, which reacted very positively and expressed a lot of enthusiasm, which increased throughout the process.'

Some **organizations built connections through responding to some of the children's personal concerns**, before moving on to explore social issues. For example, they helped them have conversations within families or with teachers.

What we noticed as missing, in some places, was **participation training**, as professionals in the organisations that had trusting relationships were not used to working with children or teenagers in participatory ways. Or, workers did not have the experience of writing the proposals, do project management and reporting outcomes that would enable access to funding for participatory activities.

Many organisations recommended working with mixed groups of children and young people, that are not just Roma children, as this could help bridge connections between communities.

Identify Issues

In this study, many children and young people needed **time to come to an informed view** about the issues discussed. Some of them started by reflecting on their own lives and concerns. Others started by playing the Child Guarantee Game, by trying out activities related to health or by reflecting on external prompts (for example a film).

> 'Sometimes it's very difficult to help them formulate an opinion. ..coming from outside the community, it's very strange that these girls were not able to say what they dream of, what they imagine for their future. It is very difficult to make them wish for something, to imagine'.

This phase of orientation was very important because many of the children involved were not privileged enough to have relevant experience, or even to be able to imagine the fulfilment of the rights which the Child Guarantee aims to deliver. For example, they had not accessed healthcare or extra-curricular activities. Once they had familiarity with the issues, however, they were able to offer insights into the barriers to fulfilment of their rights. **With children in the most marginalized situations, it is therefore important to embed participatory opportunities alongside provision to respect, protect and promote their other rights**. In many of the pilot projects children indicated that **free and open access to out of school activities** was an essential first step in finding the space and time to reflect on other issues in life.

The Child Guarantee was chosen as the focus for this work because it is broad, and was likely to connect to issues in children's own lives. But we did not push this frame of reference. Rather, we asked pilot projects to enable children to identify their own issues and concerns, and then to see how these connected back to the Child Guarantee. In every project there was some connection. However, in the evaluation interviews, we learned that in one pilot project, the leader had no understanding that the Child Guarantee had been the frame of reference. And in every project, we learned that on the ground, there was very little understanding of the Child Guarantee, as this professional reported:

> 'None of the children knew of the Child Guarantee beforehand; When the teacher presented it to the class; it was also new to her.'

What we noticed as missing, in some places, was longer **orientation to the policy area** for professionals and young leaders. This would likely have promoted more informed discussions. Also **access to role models** was a missing element, who could help children and young people aspire to achieve change.

Investigate Views

Diversify methods for enabling children's participation in public participation is important because nothing will work in all contexts. There are variables in terms of children and young people's preferred communications styles, their settings, their prior experience. In this study children chose to share their views through doing and reflecting on health promotion activities, coffee shop conversations, film-making, discussions, collage, questionnaires and observation. The inclusion of observation here is significant because we learned of the value what was being communicated through action as well as words. The inclusion of a variety of professionals offered a broader view on children's health-related experiences (such as an emotional health specialist who discovered different family issues that affected children's mental health…). Children and young people did not always want to communicate with words, but they indicated wishes and barriers very effectively through their actions. Materials created by or with children for other children, such as the education questionnaire and the Child Guarantee Game, were beneficial, but needed to be used flexibly, as a prompt for discussion rather than a fixed method.

There is **no single setting better than others** for hearing from children. For example, children can express their views in coffee shops, but not be allowed the time to speak in schools, even if they are attending these. This is important because school settings are being increasingly seen as a way of connecting to large numbers of children, but in schools there can be restrictions on children and young people's freedom to speak, to critically reflect and to offer opposing views.

> 'Accessing schools …. has been really challenging. What happens most of the time is the schools give you one hour here, two hours there, by arguing that they have a curriculum to follow, and by saying that they are behind due to Covid. There is an overall reluctance to give up the time.'

> 'it's very difficult to switch the attitudes towards children because uh, what we have here since the Communist times. The teacher is, uh, up there and the children are, uh, below and communication goes in one direction and many teachers are not able to have discussions with children to let children express their opinion. A change of attitudes should take place.'

What we noticed as missing, were **multiple 'microphones'.** That is multiple ways of hearing children's views because in everyday spaces, children and young people are expressing their views differently, and from different standpoints. One of the most consistent ways of hearing from children was through informal conversations alongside activities they wanted to take part in. To multiply microphones, and to embed these across different formal and informal

spaces, means to create ways that professionals can enable children to choose whether and how these informal expressions of views can be reported elsewhere. This may avoid the need to do extra consultations.

Take action

In this study, much of the action was taken by children and young people themselves and by their host organisations, rather than by requesting action from more distant others. For example, children themselves – in Spain and Croatia – created online content for other children informing them about rights, or Christmas-tree decorations with rights-claims written on them, informing local decision makers about their wishes. Organisations delivering the pilot projects also responded immediately to fulfilling children's wishes for leisure activities, education or support to create websites. This highlights the importance of **embedding action with children from the start of a participatory process,** rather than conceiving of action as a result of children's views being heard by a more remote audience.

For many children and young people, taking action to advocate for change at a municipal, national or international level was a distant dream. Although some children did move towards this within a relatively short period. Where young people were able to advocate, speaking for themselves and their peers to mayors or other decision-makers, **training** for children, young people and any adults working with them was valuable. This supported them **to understand the different ways of advocating for change** – from writing a letter to speaking at a meeting – and to have the confidence to do this. As one professional described:

> 'it was a very important step to educate [young leaders]. What is advocacy …et cetera, and how to develop a local campaign…. Young people don't know even how their local institutions operate. They see, for example, that in the poor area they don't have access to ambulance, but they don't even think that they could write a letter or make a campaign and push the local authorities to change the situation. You know they don't have the feeling that they can change something or they don't have …the strength and the confidence that they could change something. … Even the local person [connecting with children] is not able to develop a campaign. So the local person needs support in project management and they need support to learn how to do a campaign.'

What we noticed as missing were some of the **alliances with established children's or young people's formal structures**. In previous studies with marginalized children we have seen how local youth councils have amplified the views of children in more newly created groups. This has helped lend weight to calls for action.

Follow up action

In this study, sometimes children and young people shared their ideas through, **making and sharing a creative output followed by action.** Whether this was a photovoice exhibition, instagram posts or a leaflet, it was important to get the message out through networks of children, young people and adults. Where children had expressed their views more informally, it was important for young activists and adult community advocates to continue to share these perspectives in multiple community and municipal settings or to take direct action to continue to involve children and to increase the pressure on municipalities.

Building connections with other participatory projects was important in some pilots. This involved, for example, speaking with other adults involved in the national coordination groups to discuss how further action might be taken, and bringing ideas back to children as suggestions. It also involved, within organisations with well- established participatory traditions, looking for follow up activities and funding that would help take children and young people's ideas forward in another cycle of listening, action and change.

What we noticed as missing were **the reporting mechanisms to enable children and young people to take forward their ideas** to national or international levels. As one professional put it:

> 'under the Guarantee there are no listening mechanisms'

To make children's action in European public decision-making processes more feasible, professionals suggested it would be helpful to:

> 'Systematize these voices and provide opinions on this to Brussels … The existence of an interlocutor in the EU who would be responsible for these matters to whom we could present all these [voices].'

Other professionals suggested that, rather than taking young activists to Brussels, a first step would be for MEPs or European policy makers to visit communities, so that children could feel that their communities were known and that their views were valued.

> 'Uh, it's difficult to find, such a well-spoken activist of young people who have the advocacy skills to go on this level. It takes a lot of support…. It just came into my mind. It will be interesting to bring some of the decision makers to listen to young people… as a practitioner, I would suggest somebody from high level to go to the ghetto and see how it looks like. It comes 100 times better than to stay in the European Parliament and to listen how many problems you children from poor communities have.'

Evaluate and share

The pilots were **evaluated through participatory methods, observations, online and face-to-face interviews and critical dialogues** and **reporting forms**. We used this variety of methods to adapt to the preferences and availability of participating adults and children, and the limits of our budgets and language skills. We learned that it can feel intrusive to have an

external person involved in evaluation. Trusting relationships are needed here too. This was a less participatory approach with children than we had hoped to take throughout this study, as the language was a significant barrier.

Some organisations **embedded a reflective learning approach** in their interaction with children and young people. So they were constantly listening to or watching what children communicated, and then responding to this in their next interactions. For example, when trying to form connections with busy teenagers, workers in one pilot tried out different approaches to try to connect. They reflected on times when they girls did not attend and found alternative venues and times to offer. Once the girlst saw their flexibility, through discussion with the girls' as well, they found a time, venue and way of working together that suited everyone.

What we noticed as missing were opportunities for children and young people involved in the projects to **share stories of their activities with other people.** Some discussions were held between organisations involved in Reaching In, seeking to help children connect in two different countries where they were working on the same issues. But different timing of the activities complicated things.

3. Recommendations

Recommendations to European decision makers

⇒ **Encourage funding to grassroots organisations over long timeframes that enable relationships to be built and sustained.** This includes relationships between European institutions and intermediary organisations as well as between organisations, community facilities and children.

⇒ **Create ways that the views of children and young people can be reported to the EU, no matter where or how these are articulated.** This means not focusing just on voices expressed in consultation activities, but institutions creating ways of hearing and learning from the things that children communicate to their peers and to professionals in everyday settings. And support EU decision makers with targeted child participation training.

⇒ **Encourage European decision makers to visit communities with marginalised children.** This can build relationships through which the relevance of the EU can become more apparent and enables EU decisions makers to get an understanding of what is important to these communities.

Capacity Building

⇒ **Build capacity of grassroots organisations and of children to enable them to engage in participatory opportunities and advocacy.** This includes developing adults' empowering attitudes towards children and understanding of participation processes, project management, social action, advocacy, campaigns and current policy opportunities.

⇒ **Join up activities focused on participation and provision of educational health promoting, sporting, cultural and leisure activities.** This means providing free and open access to out-of-school activities that offer children opportunities to reflect on the world and their ambitions for themselves and their communities, and working through these to take democratic action for change.

Recommendations that can bring about change in local communities

⇒ **Support participatory processes that seek to take immediate action to bring about change in communities, as well as articulating views to wider public audiences.** This means providing sufficient funding and time and it may help reduce the disillusionment that can occur when public authorities do not respond.

⇒ **Create national communities of practice**. These enable adults and children in different projects to learn from each other, evaluate and to build common advocacy strategies, including to feed into the implementation of the Child Guarantee.

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[i] Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee

[ii] The process for commissioning and evaluating these pilots: The-Reaching-In-Approach.pdf (eurochild.org). Initial ideas about the barriers to inclusive and impactful participation, and strategies for overcoming them: Reaching In: Strategies for inclusive and impactful participation | CP4Europe

[iii] lundy_model_of_participation_0.pdf (europa.eu)

[iv] Listen – Act – Change - Council of Europe Handbook on children's participation (coe.int)