

Children's participation in government decisions across the European Union

“If you are doing something for a child, it is useless asking adults. You first need to reach out to the child to see what they want” from Malta*

This is a short report about our research on children's participation in government decisions and political life across Europe.

Children have a right to share their ideas. Governments should make sure that they reach out to hear from all children who want to be heard.

Governments should use children's ideas to help make decisions. This includes decisions about laws, policies, services and government spending. We investigated what has been happening in relation to children's participation in the European Union, from 2012-2020.

How and where did we investigate?

We looked at children's participation in government decisions internationally, nationally in 28 countries, and at a local level in 10 countries.

We ran focus groups to hear from 224 children and young people in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain. We interviewed 64 adults. We also read [documents and websites](#).

A list of the participation opportunities we found is [here](#).



* All quotes are from children, but to keep them anonymous we only use country names

How are children sharing their ideas with governments?

Children tell their ideas to governments through councils, parliaments, forums, panels, conferences, research, web discussions, creative activities, campaigns and strikes.

Child and youth councils and parliaments have existed since the 1940s. Councils now exist in 27 countries, nationally and at a local level. There are opportunities to share opinions about EU policy too. In 13 countries there are child or youth parliaments. Council and parliaments are organised in lots of different ways. Parliaments are often yearly education activities, where children can make recommendations. In 6 parliaments children can propose new laws.

Sometimes parliaments and councils have strong connections and regular meetings with local, national and international governments or politicians. Some participation opportunities are provided by governments, Children's Ombudspersons and organisations. More could be done to help children share their ideas with governments.



“We do not understand the language the adults speak, we cannot pitch the idea ... their talks and meetings are so boring” Bulgaria

“Help is best from a person with experience and knowledge of participation, regardless of age” Cyprus

“Participate and you learn by participating” Spain

What can help?

- Safe spaces and relaxed meetings
- Web platforms reporting children's ideas to governments
- Children taking the lead
- Setting up movements like Fridays for Future
- Groups of children connecting and working together



Are disadvantaged children included?

Disadvantaged children are not included in most children's participation opportunities.

Privileged children often have more opportunities to be included in children and youth councils or parliaments. In only 4 countries the rules make sure that national councils of include disadvantaged children and others are trying to make it happen.

Equal number of girls and boys are getting opportunities to participate. But, young children, children with disabilities, and children who are Roma, refugees, and LGBTQI do not get as many participation opportunities. In at least 12 countries, some one-off opportunities to participate, have involved disadvantaged children. But more could be done to be inclusive.

“How will children living in conditions of poverty participate? Children without internet, or children living in fear, or in abusive homes? The EU need to see how the children of these vulnerable groups will be included in mechanisms of participation.” Cyprus

“Why should I participate? ... They don't listen to me” Portugal

What can help?

- Explain how disadvantaged children can take part
- Encourage them and reserve space for them in all structures
- Use simple or easier language
- Publish accessible documents on all topics children care about
- Ask for help from specialist organisations to work out how all children can take part – and make sure this happens



Are children's ideas used to help governments make decisions?

No, children's participation is not having much impact on government decisions.

Sometimes children can propose ideas that are made into laws. Sometimes laws change, based on children's ideas. Sometimes attitudes change too. But, children do not have enough accessible information. Children are not part of the whole decision-making processes. There is very little feedback, monitoring or evaluation.

In only 4 out of 27 countries, it is the law that governments must include children or young people's views when making decisions. Governments see children's ideas as only recommendations. Some adults do not trust children to participate. Many children have had negative experiences of not being taken seriously when they share their views.

“We need space to present ideas, and commitments from decision-makers to work out how a proposal can be achieved and developed” Spain

“I feel it depends on the individual politician, they are very into children's rights and advocating or they're, just, like, not at all” Ireland

What can help?

- Create national laws and plans that make sure children's ideas are included in government decisions
- Support and strengthen children's participation opportunities
- Make governments include children's views in all aspects of their work
- Give children feedback about the impact of their views
- Encourage local, national and international decision-makers to use their political power to take children's ideas into account
- Change adults' attitudes about children

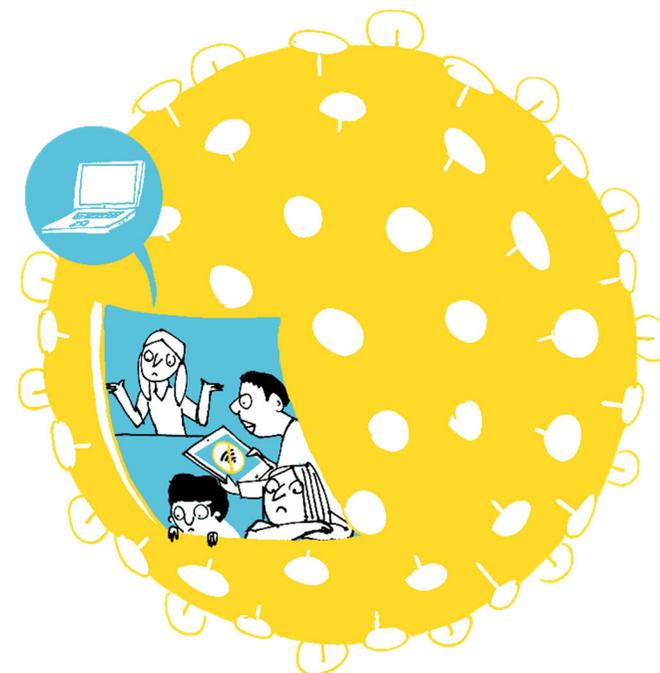


What has been the impact of Covid-19 on children's participation?

Children have helped raise awareness about Covid-19 and provided support to family, friends and communities. Because of the virus, some children have also felt sad and have enjoyed life less. Some children are experiencing more poverty and lower self-esteem.

Not all children are getting equal opportunities to have their ideas heard. Most children's participation activities have been online during Covid-19. So, some children have had meetings more regularly. Some children have taken part in online meetings with politicians further away from their homes. Some children have shared their ideas about Covid-19 at international and national levels. But, some participation opportunities have been cancelled. At home, not everyone has online access or enough information.

Children want to know why their ideas have not been used to help make decisions.



“When it came to formulating proposals about what could help, we were at home, we did not see what had worsened or what had improved” Spain

What can the EU do to help children's participation in government decisions across Europe?

- Encourage children's participation over the long term - and pay for it.
- Make children's participation a priority.
- Defend children's rights to participate
- Set an example to countries inside and outside of the EU
- Set standards and make sure these are working
- Include children in existing policy processes and in voting
- Connect using online platforms and feedback how children's views are used
- Build information sharing, knowledge and skills - and pay for it

