

Article

# The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children on child participation: Perceptions, impacts and dilemmas

by

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**Keywords:**

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**Abstract**

The adoption in 1989 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has seen a quantum leap in the recognition- and expansion of initiatives to uphold children's participation rights. The Ombudsman for Children plays an important role in promoting children's rights, thus stressing the importance of authorities taking children's opinions and experiences into consideration when making decisions which affect them. This article examines how the staff at the Ombudsman for Children in Norway understand and experience child participation through expert meetings and expert groups, in which children are regarded as the experts. The findings suggest that the existence of a consultative approach, where children's views influence decisions, depends on the effectiveness of the Ombudsman's representative function. While there is evidence of the recent growth of platforms for children to express their views, the core elements of participation largely remain monopolized by adults. We argue that active participation should be deliberately promoted beyond adult-led realms, and extended to ordinary contexts in which children interact with the society.

**Keywords**

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## **Introduction**

The notion of independent rights for children has gained unprecedented prominence in academic, policy and practice circles, both at the local and international levels. A possible explanation for this positive surge is society's increasing appreciation of the problems that historically have, and continue to assail, children's well-being. In communities throughout the world, children have often been relegated to the status of second-class citizens, and denied the rights that their adult counterparts enjoy (Burke, 2010; Lansdown, 1997). This has left children, particularly in the developing world, exposed to numerous vulnerabilities (UNHCR, 2012; Wessells, 2009). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was therefore a landmark instrument for protecting children to proactively ensure that duty bearers like the state take practical steps to protect the rights of children. More importantly, the adoption aimed to guarantee that children are not simply passive recipients of adult-orchestrated handouts, but active participants in the process.

The Ombudsman for Children is an advocate for children and young people, which ensures that the authorities and society are upholding the rights of children. This entails talking to and seeking advice from children and young people on matters concerning them, and to bring out their perspectives to decision-makers. In this study, we explore how workers for the Ombudsman for Children in Norway experience 'expert meetings' and 'groups' with children, and how they perceive the impact, challenges and efficacy of child participation in such dialogue arrangements. In light of this objective, the research question for this study is: 'How do expert meetings and groups approach child participation, and of what significance are these initiatives?' Specifically, this study poses two main questions:

1. How do staff at the Ombudsman for Children perceive children's participation and the impact of expert meetings and groups?
2. What are the main dilemmas involved in the conduct of expert meetings and groups, and what lessons can be drawn from their experiences?

Exploring how the Ombudsman perceives child participation and their experiences on divulging children's voices to authorities may help to provide important insights on how children's right to be heard is facilitated, and how their perspectives may influence on a policy level.

*Evidence on child participation*

Advocates of child participation argue that it provides benefits not only for children, but also communities, organizations and for the wider society. At the individual level, child participation nurtures confidence, a sense of self-esteem and the ability to take on everyday challenges (Burke, 2010; Ciara, 2010; Malone & Hartung, 2010). For specific groups of children, especially those affected by discrimination, marginalization or similar disempowering processes, participation can help promote empowerment (Healy, 1998) by acting as a powerful channel through which to underscore their predicaments, and challenge deep-rooted oppressive and exploitative tendencies. Child participation hence becomes an instrument for the realization of other rights (Lansdown, 2010).

The participation of children has also been linked to processes of civil society development, democracy, accountability and service improvement (Cloke & Davies, 1997; Lansdown, 2011). The evidence that children have different considerations from those of adults, and have a better understanding of their situation, supports the view that when genuinely involved and supported in an age-appropriate way to voice their concerns, the result is a system that responds to the unmet needs of children. This not only ensures efficiency gains in terms of service enhancement, but is also associated with positive learning outcomes for organizations and their professionals, which enhances both personal and institutional development (Burke, 2010).

Children's participation at a policy level is occasionally facilitated through arrangements in which children can inform politicians on their views on matters and policies affecting them. Sedletzki (2012) suggests two primary approaches to child participation in independent institutions like the Ombudsman for Children. The first approach is an institutionalized involvement of children in policy dialogues on a regular or permanent basis. Institutionalized approaches may take the form of established channels such as youth advisory panels (Hodgkin & Newell, 2008, p. 10), or youth commissions, to advise politicians on legislative, policy, budgetary and programme issues affecting children and young people (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005). The second approach manifests itself through short ad hoc consultative engagements with children on an issue of concern at a particular point. This may be done through consultations, interviews or hearings and facilitates obtaining views from a larger number of children (Sedletzki, 2012).

In themselves, these different approaches do not guarantee that participation will be effective, or that the children's views will have a meaningful impact. It is argued that the success of participatory initiatives is premised on adherence to a set of principles, which ensures that the entire process is genuine, ethically sound and respectful of the views and unique situation of children. Essentially, the process ought to be transparent and informative, as well as voluntary and respectful, facilitated by child-friendly environments and working methods (Lansdown, 2011, pp. 152-156). In other words, effective participation ought to take into cognizance of children's evolving capacities (CRC, Article 5).

Despite such positive aspirations, there is a persistent discrepancy between ideal and real participatory initiatives involving children (Smith & Lødrup, 2004; Verhellen & Weyts, 2003). Traditionally, children have occupied a position secondary to that of adults (Lansdown, 2011; Malone & Hartung, 2010; White & Choudhury, 2010), and are often perceived as incapable of forming independent views, and therefore 'deficient subjects in an adult-centred world' (Avgitidou & Stamou, 2013). In many communities, perceptions of childhood have also limited children's participation. Childhood is often viewed as a period of innocence and play, in which whenever possible children should be protected from the grim realities of life (Van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2014). Providing opportunities for children's participation is seen as conferring responsibility, which in turn is interpreted as a burden on the innocent child. But for progress to be made, adults must appreciate children's inherent competency to participate (Malone & Hartung, 2010; Sommer, Pramling, & Hundeide, 2010), and that children can exhibit varying degrees of involvement consistent with their age. To spearhead such a culture, adults must learn to relinquish some of their power, engage with children as equal partners and rethink their roles in terms of facilitating rather than directing the process (Hart, 2008; Healy, 1998; Lansdown, 1997).

#### *Expert meetings and groups at the Ombudsman for Children in Norway*

Norway was the first country to implement the idea of an Ombudsman for Children (Barneombudet) in 1981 (Miljeteig, 2005). The institution's overarching mandate is to 'promote the interests of children vis-à-vis public and private authorities, and to follow-up on the development of conditions under which children grow up' (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet, 1981). This duty includes assuring that authorities comply

with legislation on children's rights, proposing measures that can strengthen children's safety under the law and advancing proposals for measures that can solve or prevent conflicts between children and society. It also incorporates the duty to ensure that children are heard, and that their views taken into account when authorities make decisions. Thus, expert meetings and groups were established by the Ombudsman as a consultative channel through which to enlist the views of children, and use them in the execution of its mandate as a watchdog for their rights in society.

A distinction between expert meetings and expert groups is provided in the Ombudsman for Children's Expert Handbook (The Ombudsman for Children, 2013, p. 4):

When we talk about expert meetings, we mean relatively short, one-off meetings with a group of children and young people [...] We frequently hold these expert meetings prior to a conference; they can take the form of a meeting at a school, a visit to a youth club, etc. Such meetings normally last between one to four hours. Expert groups on the other hand are made up of children and young people with experiences in a particular area, who work for a period of time on important issues together with the Ombudsman's staff. Their duration can be between three to four meetings over the course of two to four months.

Implicit in this distinction is that expert meetings seek to obtain a general rather than in-depth impression of a particular issue, whereas expert groups aim at a more in-depth knowledge about children's experiences. The character of expert groups and meetings is therefore similar to the forms of young people's involvement reported in the global study of independent human rights institutions for children (Sedletzki, 2012), i.e., expert groups for the regular or permanent institutionalized mechanisms, while expert meetings are used for the rather ad hoc consultations.

Nevertheless, expert meetings and groups share some features. Essentially, both are intended to give children an opportunity to influence the Ombudsman's recommendations on how to promote their rights in different contexts, and adult staff from the Ombudsman facilitate both. Participants (children) are informed on the purpose of the meeting or group, the duration and how the information shared will be utilized. The facilitators of meetings and groups use child-friendly methodologies: the use of post-it notes, ball games, chair game, land of dreams and Café Dialogue. These are contained in a publication by the Norwegian Peace Association entitled 'Do you Dream? /Are you Dreaming?', which were adapted for use in expert meetings and

groups and classified according to the key steps in conducting expert meetings and groups, namely getting to know each other, gathering information and evaluation/feedback. Reports about expert meetings or groups are published on the website, and also shared with children who participated in the child-friendly format.

## **Study design and methodology**

### *Design*

This study adopted a qualitative approach. Primary data were solicited by conducting in-depth interviews with the Ombudsman' staff. A semi-structured interview guide was developed around the research questions, and explored issues pertaining to expert meetings and the nature of child participation. These included perceptions of participation and its purpose, the selection of child participants, their roles, duration of activities, methods of engagement, impact of participatory initiatives, challenges encountered and lessons learned among others. The interviews lasted between 1½-2 hours.

Four Ombudsman for Children advisors (out of 12) participated in the study. All the participants were full-time employees of the Ombudsman: two Senior Advisors and two Advisors, with an average of seven years' (maximum nine and minimum three years) experience in facilitating expert meetings and groups addressing a wide range of issues, including: child abuse, education, health and participation. Two of the participants chose to be interviewed together. All the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and data collection was conducted in February 2015.

Although children were the subject of this research, they were not involved as primary participants in the study. This was mainly because the research was conducted as part of a Master' programme and the principal author lacked sufficient Norwegian language proficiency to engage the children. Involving children would also have necessitated mobilizing them from various parts of the country; yet the time and financial resources available to the student were not adequate for this purpose.

### *Analysis*

This study employed a thematic analysis approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008) assisted by NVivo software. The first step involved an open reading of individual

transcripts in order to identify and categorize raw data under thematic areas representing the research questions. The second step involved reading through material under the preliminary themes with an intention of identifying data and classifying it into subcategories representative of the main theme. Examples of themes and sub-themes generated from the analysis are; Rationale for participation (decision-making, children's rights, outcome for adults, benefits for children), Relevance of expert meetings (outcomes for adults, benefits for children, impacts), and Challenges and suggestions (protectionism, evaluation of impact, suggestions, time, other challenges).

These themes gave rise to properties under respective subcategories, hence representing Punch's (2005, p. 206) concept indicator model. NVivo's annotating and memoing function was used to construct analytical reflections on the data and establish connections within different categories, and between individual respondents. This enabled the researcher to develop connections between the empirical data and existing literature. The third and final step involved identifying and merging redundant codes, as well as identifying and correcting material that was coded either under erroneous or multiple codes. Quotations included in the findings were selected based on their ability to illustrate the emerging patterns addressing the research questions for the study.

### *Ethical considerations*

The project was discussed with the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), and ethical approval was not deemed necessary. Nonetheless, both written and verbal information on the research project was provided and all participants gave their consent, thereby ensuring that the research complied with ethical guidelines for research (National Committee for Research Ethics in Norway, 2006).

## **Findings**

### *The Ombudsman's perception of children's participation*

Article 12 of the CRC states that children who can form their own views are free to express those views in all matters which affect them. It goes on to say that age and maturity will determine the weight given to the child's views. In our study, it was



emphasized that even younger children can express their views, and should therefore be facilitated:

Children in kindergartens at the age of four or five have very strong opinions of right and wrong, how to behave to each other, what they want to play with or what they want to eat (Respondent 1)

To Respondent 1, it seems insufficient to merely appreciate that children have the capacity to form their own views. Provisions must also be in place through which those views can be communicated, adding: '*...there must be room where children are invited in to say what they want*'. Another respondent offers a complementary perspective: '*I think it is important that children can have their voice heard, that we as an ombudsman can help them to be heard*' (Respondent 3). Inherent in this statement is the assumption that it can be difficult for children to get heard, and that it requires someone in a position of responsibility to ensure that when children speak, there is an active and concerted commitment to consider those views in decision-making. These perspectives – i) creating a space for expressing views, and ii) the obligation to consider them in decision-making – offer a conceptual window for understanding and assessing progress towards the realization of children's participation rights.

The findings also highlight gradations of participation in decision-making, emphasizing the importance of children and adults engaging together in a democratic manner, giving all due respect and consideration to each other's views in decision-making processes:

It also means that children are part of the decision-making; not that they are making the decisions, but that those who are making the decisions keep an eye on what the children's perspectives are because these perspectives are important in making decisions. (Respondent 3)

These remarks depict an adult's differentiation between genuine child participation and 'child control', in which young people usurp absolute decision-making responsibility. Participation therefore requires consideration of the children's perspective, shared responsibility and a dialogue between the participants:

In Norway, we are used to thinking that children begin to participate at a certain age in life, but that is not my view. For me, participation is how you interact with the grown-ups and how the grown-ups interact with you.

This excerpt describes participation as an activity; it is a question about how participants interact, and where open dialogue seems to be a key element. He continues:

Grown-ups must teach children that when you say what you want, sometimes you get what you want, but some other times you get what another wants. That is part of the democratic learning. But next time, you should still say what you want because it can be taken into consideration.  
(Respondent 1)

This is an important point, and suggests a dialogical approach to participation, in which expressing one's views will always be an important contribution to the decision-making process. This is further emphasized by another statement recognizing that children contribute important knowledge when expressing their views and experiences:

If we don't facilitate children's participation, we lose a lot of very important knowledge, because I don't know what it's like to be a five-year-old today. I knew it once, but that was 50 years ago... so, I need that knowledge because then we can prepare our laws, our systems and society in a better way – so it is more collaborative with the children's needs at all times.  
(Respondent 1)

This suggests that children are bearers of important knowledge, and furthermore that knowledge is relative to time. Knowing how it used to be to be a child does not necessarily translate into knowing how it is today. One respondent cited an episode in which a playground was constructed without consulting children, resulting in its abandonment:

If they had consulted children before, they would find out where children played and what they need. That is why I say it is stupid, because if you don't consult children and know what they think, you end up doing double work and wasting resources. (Respondent 2)

Participation initiatives thus seek to bridge the gap between the adult experts' conceptions of children's needs vis-à-vis the children's own views and experiences of the world, which should ultimately facilitate more child-friendly decisions.

### *The impact of children's participation in expert meetings and groups*

Despite the perceptions of children's participation presented above, expert groups and meetings predominantly seem to undertake a consultative approach, in which children's own experiences may provide insights on how to respond to difficult situations:

They (experts) are meant to contribute to improving the system for other children who might be going through the same experience, so that adults know what to do when other children go through such horrible things.  
(Respondent 3)

Another respondent puts it differently, indicating that children's voices may also have a political impact:

Our role is to give some advice to the government and even more interesting is that, prior to giving the advice, we appreciate that we have to talk with children who have experienced the system because they know how it is to live in a child welfare system. Nobody else can know what it is like to live in a child welfare system. (Respondent 3)

In that respect, expert meetings and groups serve as one medium for children's voices. The Ombudsman's representative role is therefore enriched by incorporating the views of children into the recommendations made to the public and private institutions, which are mandated to make decisions that impact children's situations:

As a result of recommendations from hospital experts, we know that many doctors have changed the guidelines on how they talk to children. The advice of children with family members in prison has also guided renovation of the living rooms to help make them more family-friendly all over the country. (Respondent 2)

There has also been some change in the practice in hospitals. It's not a change in law per se, but just a change in practice that they are making their own youth panels that give advice to the hospitals on how to arrange the medical treatment, how to arrange the rooms. This is also an impact of the children's advice directly on the hospitals (Respondent 1)

These views suggest that adults have the opportunity to change their ways of engaging with children and/or making decisions that are in harmony with the interests and position of children. Indeed, a change is evident in both individual practice and the orientation of the broader system, indirectly inspired by a participatory process that gives credence to the views of children and a platform to express them.

Participants further emphasized that participating in expert meetings and groups is often an empowering process for children:

When children participate, they educate themselves and, at the same time, their perception of the environment, the family, the school and the society is more in balance and they get a chance to understand what is going on, and that is a resilience factor in their life. We see this quite often, especially when meeting children in special life situations like abuse or bullying – when they start to tell their own story and to create a dialogue with others, they get to know where they are coming from and where they are going tomorrow. It's also an important part for children to develop their mind and their psychological status. (Respondent 1)

In this way, expert meetings and groups provide more than just an opportunity to elicit their views, as individual self-reflection and the collective sharing of experiences among the participants may have impacts that go beyond expressing viewpoints and experiences. In follow-up remarks, the respondent stresses that this process

constitutes an important step in the children's ability to appreciate and constructively relate with their environment:

So, participation gives meaning! The issue here is that if I get orders every day from my boss, I can do what they require me to do, but in the end I miss the meaning; but if she invites me in to discuss, she can tell me 'why' she is asking me to do this and that. And when I get the meaning, I can prepare to fulfil the task. That is the same with children; if you invite them in they get to understand the context and the meaning, and they get prepared to fulfil the task. (Respondent 1)

Involving children enables them to understand the rationale behind certain decisions that often manifest in- and shape their everyday world. That is, participation enables children to appreciate the constraints, bureaucracies and attendant negotiation processes faced by systems mandated to serve them.

On the topics of learning and reflection, another participant sees expert meetings and groups as channels through which adults can tap into these interactions to influence alternative perspectives and discover solutions to professional dilemmas:

Whenever we conduct these meetings, I always learn something new. They always give me another angle to look at something, and they always have the solution that is quite simple – a solution which we have not thought of. Many of their suggestions challenge us and get us thinking, 'Why haven't we been acting like that?' (Respondent 4)

Experience garnered from expert meetings and groups challenges the adult conception of children as incompetent and passive beings. In a way, the respondent underscores the need for adults not to presume superiority of their views and impose them upon children, but rather to appreciate the need to promote a partnership and give their views respectful consideration.

#### *Dilemmas associated with the expert meetings and groups*

Despite the positive intentions of the Ombudsman to involve children in the execution of its mandate, the institution admits that the process involves balancing difficult professional and personal considerations. Such dilemmas may revolve around the selection of participants:

What is important is that those children who come to the meeting have been undergoing some kind of help on the outside. By this I mean that we have to ensure that these children have been seeing a psychologist or working through the trauma, or that they are not just in the middle of it. It's not that you can get over it forever, but you have to move on. So we make sure that we have children who have been able to move on in some way... (Respondent 4)

This implies a selection process and hence some criteria to ensure, among other things, that children with difficult experiences have overcome the trauma, which also implies that some children are excluded. Moreover, another respondent sees children's exclusion from participation as related to the issue of parental consent:

Another challenge is to find the right children, because the grown-ups are very protective, and this includes the professional grown-ups. They keep arguing that: 'Oh no, I don't think that he or she can talk.'. And if you ask if they have asked the children, they say no, but still emphasize that they think the children don't want to talk. So, that is a big challenge, and I think that there are many children who don't want to talk to us, and there are also many children who want to share their story. (Respondent 1)

Adults - both parents and professionals - wield much power and control over children, which may undermine children's competency and limit participation. However, these remarks also suggest that irrespective of the circumstances, participatory processes often constitute a process of negotiation in which some participants are selected to represent the views of, or deliberate on, an issue of relevance to a bigger population.

Another dilemma faced by respondents is related to the completion of consultations. When the consultations have progressed, terminating the engagement may be problematic, particularly with expert groups which involve several participatory sessions:

What we see is that some groups get attached, and they seem to identify with the cause and want to work with it. However, that is not something that we want to encourage because we want them to give us information and then move on with their lives. (Respondent 2)

To help children achieve a healthy post-participation balance, the Ombudsman facilitates an outsider, usually a social worker or psychologist. The institution also provides children with feedback on the outcomes of their engagement, e.g., by sharing reports in which their opinions have been included. Nevertheless, the timespan of expert meetings and groups may be seen in relation to the mandate for the children's Ombudsman:

Our job is to give recommendations to politicians and other authorities about what they should change in the laws and policies, but then it stops there and we don't really follow up to see if it has changed. (Respondent 2)

Despite that expert meetings and groups can provide a channel for information exchange, and ultimately bridge the gap between children's perspectives and the actions of decision-makers, this statement demonstrates a common concern that the

institution lacks a mechanism to ensure follow-up on the uptake and implementation of the institution's recommendations.

## **Discussion**

### *Ideal or pragmatic participation?*

Based on the findings above, expert meetings and groups make a commendable contribution towards the advancement of children's rights in Norway. Considering that children are often excluded from mainstream decision-making (Lansdown, 2010; Theis, 2010), channels aimed at eliciting children's experiences may impact on legislation, policies, services and institutional practices to promote, respect and fulfil children's rights (Lansdown, 2001; Mannion, 2010; Ponet, 2011). One example is where participants reported that several hospitals in Norway have established their own youth/children's councils to advise on how to create child-friendly environments in that context. That said, the Ombudsman's role primarily focuses on 'proposing measures and putting forward proposals' to advance children's rights and well-being, but little is said about how these proposals ought to be adopted.

Still, the findings may open new directions for policy in matters affecting children and youth. For instance, that by adopting a qualitative lens as opposed to large-scale consultations, expert meetings and groups help to unearth trivial issues that may limit the realization of children's rights in different environs. To promote the effective involvement of children, it is crucial to understand the operational context and advance a participatory ethos that takes cognizance of its limitations.

Despite the impact of expert meetings and groups in terms of giving children a platform to express their views and have them represented, we question whether such efforts promote a rather ideal – as opposed to pragmatic and more organic – sort of participation (Tisdall et al., 2008). Essentially, agenda setting is predominantly a preoccupation of adults, with few opportunities for children to influence the content of the deliberations. The adults set the stage, and define the agenda for participation. Furthermore, children do not seem directly involved in writing up the reports. Consequently, there is a risk that important messages may be omitted as the adults decide what to extract in their further proposals. Within such engagement, children run

the risk of lacking a real impact on the process and the outcome, despite a sincere aim of mediating the children's perspectives.

'Information-giving', which is a crucial element of expert meetings and groups, helps dissolve undemocratic participatory processes (Kimberlee, 2008; Lansdown, 2011); however, children's age-appropriate influence on agenda setting would, if encouraged, significantly bolster the practical outcomes of adult-led initiatives. That said, the Ombudsman have also established an online forum – 'Ask the ombudsman' – through which children inquire about a range issues deemed relevant to them. This forum may be able to influence the subject matter of consultative expert meetings and groups by giving due weight to the issues expressed there.

Ideally, participatory initiatives should offer children equal opportunities for participation, depending on their age and evolving capacity (Lansdown, 2011). However, the same principle requires protection in situations where participation may result in negative physical or mental harm to children (Hart, Newman, Ackermann, & Feeny, 2004). Architects of expert meetings and groups argue that this is the foundation for the selection of a few 'right/fitting' participants, while excluding children, especially those in the midst of a crisis. This is grounded in important ethical considerations, with the aim of minimizing risk to the child's safety and well-being (Munro, 2002; Welbourne, 2012). Yet, this leaves fundamental questions regarding how consultative initiatives like expert meetings and groups can partake of the child's perspective, and how the participation of children with crises might be facilitated while they are not present. In a way, such a selection points to the issue of gatekeeping, whereby those with power (usually adults) impede opportunities for children's participation (Lansdown, 2005; Mannion, 2010).

This problem is also related to the unrelenting controversy between guaranteeing children's safety and protection on the one hand, and respecting their autonomy and independence on the other (Lansdown, 1997; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). The challenge is that with such an orientation, expert meetings and groups may fall into the trap of adopting age-defined competence as a yardstick for participation, instead of adapting the process to suit the age and evolving capacities of individual children. It is

essential to ensure that meeting places and working methods are relevant to, and developed in partnership, with children.

Initiatives like expert meetings and groups are certainly valuable because they help to expose gaps in meeting children's needs and upholding their rights in specific circumstances; even so, the major thrust should be for participation to become the norm in every aspect of children's interaction within a diversity of political, economic, social, cultural or religious contexts. These may include families, schools, welfare institutions, political parties and justice systems among others. Institutions like the Ombudsman might, where appropriate, promote children's participation in their activities, but the greater challenge is to nurture a participatory ethos among those with whom children interact in ordinary (everyday) contexts. Most importantly, the extent to which the work of the Ombudsman can generate tangible outcomes will depend on the government's and other stakeholders' commitment to follow up on and assure the uptake of those recommendations.

#### *A synthesis of key issues and lessons*

The findings of this research offer key insights regarding children's rights in general, and participation in particular. They challenge the view that adult or professional experience is a yardstick for determining children's capacity to participate, instead pointing to the recognition of children's competency as a breakthrough in that direction. The research also uncovers bottlenecks that must be deliberately and progressively addressed to promote children's participation. These include protectionist tendencies, maintaining a professional relationship with children, adults' perceptions regarding children's age and their competency to participate, and promoting the participation of children who have faced difficult experiences and how to pin down the impact of children's participation.

Watchdog institutions like the Ombudsman can certainly do a lot to promote a culture of participation; however, without strong follow-up mechanisms, there is no guarantee that their work will yield tangible results. If this happens, children will lose trust in the institutions' capacity to represent their views. A feasible and promising solution to this gap is to form new or harness existing partnerships with those – e.g., labour unions, professional bodies, media and academics – who might have both the resources and



mandate to monitor actions of government. In any case, functioning as an effective watchdog for children's rights requires that the ombudsman 'draw on the broadest possible base of information relating to the living conditions for children' (Miljeteig, 2005, p. 7).

Lastly, while achieving genuine and effective participatory methods for children and young people requires an ethos that takes contextual realities into account (Healy, 1998), sharing information on what has and has not worked helps countries to 'benefit tremendously from exchanging experience and hard-won solutions with one another' (WHO, 2008, p. 1). Specifically, within the field of children's participation, learning from others' experience helps to improve the quality of initiatives (Farrar, Ghannam, Manning, & Munro, 2010; Kirby & Laws, 2010). Part of the purpose of this study was to document experiences in one particular context, stimulate discussion and promote learning that may facilitate adaptations to other practice contexts.

### *Limitations*

Since expert meetings and groups were investigated as a reference case, a key limitation of the study is that the results may not be generalizable to a bigger group. The fact that the research data on expert meetings and groups were obtained from insiders raises concerns about social desirability bias (Chung & Monroe, 2003; Neeley & Cronley, 2004); however, we observed that participants expressed themselves openly and frankly, as evidenced by the critical perspective with which they discussed and presented essential elements underpinning expert meetings and groups.

We appreciate that the involvement of children as primary respondents would have gone a long way to providing an alternative child perspective and help counterbalance adult opinions about expert meetings and groups. Nonetheless, the ethical implications and the time available were not favourable to involving children. Therefore, in order obtain more balanced data, future studies should interact with- and incorporate children's views as a primary source.

### **Conclusions**

The findings presented above exemplify the Ombudsman's appreciation of the principles required for achieving an effective and ethical participatory ethos. In spite of

this conception, the general conduct of expert meetings and groups reveals an adult-led sphere that may not confer upon children a meaningful and shared role in decision-making. Yet, the real promise of participation lies in the power to inculcate within society an all-round value system that both celebrates children's competency, and demonstrates genuine commitment to engage with them respectfully as equals. Such a model of participation should not be restrictively interpreted in view of tokenistic information giving and collaborative engagement, when the fundamental premises for according young people an equal opportunity to influence the agenda for consultation or other forms of participation largely remain monopolized by adults. As such, participation must be visible and robustly encouraged in everyday contexts within which both adults and children routinely interact. Nevertheless, the practical realization of a participatory ethos of this nature in many contexts presents real, conflicting and daunting dilemmas. Resolution of such dilemmas requires that adults adopt working methods that both appreciate and give credence to children's agency consistent with their age and level of maturity. A key question is certainly how to follow up on the uptake and redress of recommendations by the Ombudsman that ensues from expert meetings and groups. Resolving this lies outside the scope of this study, but will nonetheless be important for maintaining the institution's relevance as a credible voice and watchdog for children's rights.

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