

# Children as partners in development

### The issues at a glance

World Vision strongly supports children's right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, including decisions in the formulation of the post-2015 development agenda. Thus we urge that

- decision-makers ensure the active participation of children and youth at all levels of the post-2015 process, including in national consultations
- the United Nations High Level Panel convene a special consultation with children and youth to hear directly their aspirations for the post-2015 development framework
- special efforts be made to include the most vulnerable children
- recommendations to the UN Secretary-General that emerge from the national, thematic and High Level Panel processes respond to the needs and concerns of children and youth.

### Rationale

World Vision strongly believes that children have a right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, including decisions in the formulation of the post-2015 development agenda.

All children have the ability to participate if their evolving capacities are respected and accommodated. When children and youth are seen as partners in development their participation fosters ownership and empowerment to contribute to their own well-being and that of society as a whole.

World Vision knows from experience that working in partnership with children and youth helps organisations and public institutions to be more targeted in their work and more effective in their strategies, and to directly contribute to the well-being of the entire population.

Thus, child and youth participation in the post-2015 development process will increase the credibility of the recommendations that emerge from the process at local, national and global levels.

Some efforts have started in the international development community to empower children and provide them with the space to influence decision-making processes. However, reports have highlighted that poverty reduction strategies linked to the



*The Middle East and Eastern Europe Youth Forum in progress*

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) almost universally failed to adequately assess the voices of youth populations and many country reports to the UN Millennium Project do not mention the situation of young people.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these limitations, there are good examples of successful initiatives that promote the full engagement of children and youth in influencing public debate processes in Brazil, Lebanon, Albania and Ghana.

## Participation of children and youth is a right

The Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly affirms that children have the right to express their opinions, to be listened to, and to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The Convention recognises that children are agents of their own lives who have the capability to engage in decision-making with gradually increasing autonomy, in accordance with their evolving capacities.<sup>2</sup> Their participation is pivotal to ensure inclusiveness and ownership of the development process, to build democratic societies, to reduce dependency, and to achieve a broader impact on the well-being of children and youth.

## Importance of child and youth participation in the post-2015 process

Participation contributes to the personal development of children and youth, by endowing them with confidence and leadership skills. A growing body of evidence suggests that when their experiences and views are taken into account, children develop cognitive abilities, respect for others, self-esteem and social skills. Indeed, children and youth who express their opinions learn to take responsibility and become better at making decisions. Those who ask questions are more likely to develop the ability for critical thinking and a robust understanding and exercise of democratic citizenship.

Participation of children and youth also benefits decision-making processes. It is well understood that participatory processes lead to better decisions and outcomes, and that government services are more efficient and less wasteful when they are informed by the concerns and opinions of their constituency. Adults do not necessarily have a comprehensive view of the issues that children and youth face, whereas children and youth, as individuals and as distinct age groups, possess a unique knowledge and perspective about their aspirations and concerns. By informing the decisions that affect their lives, children and youth can contribute to making them more effective, relevant and sustainable.

Children account for an average of 37 per cent of the population in developing countries and up to 49 per cent in the least developed countries. From a demographic perspective alone, it is thus imperative that children feature prominently in development efforts, including the

"As youth with power, self-belief and passion for life, we aim to build a society where children are protected and able to capture the world. We are the future which means we have a responsibility to make this world a better place to live. It is time that the voices of youth around the world are heard and taken into account. We have something to contribute. We are full of energy waiting to be transformed into action."

- Declaration, Middle East and Eastern Europe Youth Forum

formulation and implementation of the post-2015 agenda. Furthermore, the MDGs themselves recognised that children and youth are among the most vulnerable to a range of challenges. Whether it is child mortality, environmental degradation, HIV and AIDS, hunger, lack of education, maternal mortality, poverty or unemployment, the impact is bound to be much greater on children and youth than on their older counterparts. This is not only because children and youth often lack economic, political and social assets, but also because they are frequently overlooked in national and international development planning efforts.

## Effective child participation in community-based decision-making processes

World Vision and other organisations' experience has proven that children can undertake their own initiatives and implement child-led projects that allow them to make decisions and influence their families and communities. Some of these initiatives aim to influence public decisions, while others seek to improve their environment, enhance relations with peers, or raise awareness about issues that matter to them.

**Youth Monitoring of Public Policies (MJPOP) in Brazil** engages children and youth to lead political processes in their communities where young people identify the problems that affect them and, together with community stakeholders, propose solutions and encourage everyone's role in fulfilling their rights and

responsibilities. Young people from MJPOP's Salvador chapter engaged in rebuilding a primary school that was in very bad condition. They involved the community and stakeholders to put pressure on the local government. As a result of the mobilisation organised by MJPOP, the municipality of Salvador decided to cover all the costs associated with the reconstruction of the school.

**The Children's Committee in Shambarai in Tanzania** has engaged in promoting child rights, especially helping children who are discriminated against and challenging the community on issues of violence. For example, the Children's Committee supported children whose parents wanted to force their daughters to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM), taking a key role in empowering children to report the cases of violence against them. As a result of this child-led initiative, the prevalence of FGM has decreased in the community and has been replaced by special ceremonies to maintain the tradition of indicating a significant step into womanhood.

**Girls and boys from rural communities in El Salvador engaging in local-level social accountability projects** learned about the importance of civic participation and exercising their right to participate, while also learning important facilitation and team-building skills. With the knowledge and tools acquired, children were able to organise meeting agendas, request meetings, and lead gatherings with other youth, adults and service providers. This local-level social accountability initiative was an opportunity for



*Cambodian and Indian children presenting at an Asian leadership forum*

children and youth to become agents of change in their communities and improve education services provided by the local government.

## **Successful child participation in international reporting and monitoring processes**

Supporting children's participation in the reporting process to the Convention on the Rights of the Child has become standard practice for many organisations, and when the Human Rights Council launched its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism in 2008, it provided an opportunity to ensure that children's voices influenced decisions at a new political level.

**Children associated with World Vision in Lebanon became the first group of children to submit a child-led report to the UPR.** They sent a representative to follow the process in Geneva and report back to the group. All four of the main recommendations made by the children were raised by different governments during the review, and three were accepted by the government of Lebanon. In addition, governmental attitudes towards NGO alternative reporting and child participation changed considerably as a result of this work. They learned that the message conveyed is far more powerful and real when it comes from a first-hand source.

**Children from India who were part of the "Nine is Mine" campaign, motivated by the achievements of the children from Lebanon, decided in 2011 to formulate their work into a UPR submission.** Coordinated by Edmund Rice International, three children went to Geneva to present their recommendations. Representatives from governments expressed their strong support to the children and confirmed how much they appreciated having the chance to form their views about a country directly from those most affected.

**Children from Albania, as part of a national coalition, submitted a child-led report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.** This resulted from consultations with over 9,000 members of children's clubs throughout Albania. All the children involved gained an understanding of child rights and many are involved in activities to ensure that child rights are

respected at the local level and within their communities. Three children travelled to Geneva to brief the Committee directly about the issues Albanian children had identified as being of particular concern.

**World Vision children's clubs in Ghana worked together to identify and report on common issues of concern in different parts of the country in 2012.** Following the submission of their report, two children aged 16 and 17 met government representatives in Geneva to brief them about progress since the 2008 Ghanaian UPR. During the main presentation to 16 governments, the two spoke about issues of which they had particular experience. The children were invited to meet the president of Ghana to debrief him about their meetings in Geneva, and the government has pledged to examine how the children's recommendations can be implemented.

## Children and youth in the post-2015 development agenda

As demonstrated above, child and youth participation has had a significant impact on policy-making processes at the local, national and global levels. We believe that it can have an important impact on the outcomes of the post 2015 process. Meaningful participation of children and youth in the formulation and implementation of the post-2015 agenda requires robust practices and systems to support them in developing their views.

This represents a critical opportunity to change the prevailing paradigm of children and youth as just passive beneficiaries and clients of development. By providing them with spaces to influence this agenda, we contribute to more effective development, to breaking the cycles of disenfranchisement, poverty and exclusion, and to ensuring sustainability through intergenerational focus and formation of social capital.

Children and youth can contribute towards the post-2015 agenda by

- signalling how they are already benefiting from current MDGs, and identifying what was missed. Where did the MDGs get it right? Where did they get wrong? What did they overlook?
- defining new and emerging priorities and coming up with creative and innovative paths of action to tackle their problems and those of their community

- taking action at the community, local and national levels in the implementation of initiatives, measures and policies to attain whatever goals are agreed upon
- holding governments accountable for whatever commitments they make
- creating meaningful spaces for other children and youth to engage in developmental actions
- taking a moral stand around issues that affect them, enhancing their vision and vocation for their own lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Davila-Ortega, Luis & Freeburg, Emily (2006) Youth, Democratic Governance and the MDGs Report in Asia and the Pacific. Global Youth Action Network, [http://regionalcentrebangkok.undp.or.th/practices/governance/documents/Youth\\_Democratic\\_Governance\\_and\\_the\\_MDG\\_s\\_in\\_Asia\\_Pacific.pdf](http://regionalcentrebangkok.undp.or.th/practices/governance/documents/Youth_Democratic_Governance_and_the_MDG_s_in_Asia_Pacific.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard. (UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/12, 2009), <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ae562c52.html>