



# *POSITION PAPER OF AMWCY AND ENDA JEUNESSE ACTION*

*“Moving from Participation to children’s Protagonism”*



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*The concept of child participation has been a topic of discussion for several decades. However, there is an urgent need to shift the paradigm and allow children to lead their own participation efforts, with adults providing support and guidance.*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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## Prelude



*For several years now, actors dedicated to promoting and improving children's rights and well-being in Africa have been working towards developing and enhancing children's lives through their active participation. Unlike the situation twenty or thirty years ago, when the concept of children's participation was limited to mere declarations or conflicting views shared during meetings and conferences organised by institutions and governments.*

*Today, the term "participation" is widely used by actors who are seeking ways to involve children in decision-making processes*





# Legal framework of child participation

*In many countries, across Africa and globally, national laws, policies and frameworks address child participation to ensure children's contribution to decision-making processes on issues that affect them, including:*

## **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):**

*Article 12, para.1 concerns the right to express one's own opinion, Article 13 on freedom of expression, the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information, ..." and Article 15 of the CRC stipulates that "States Parties recognize the right of the child to freedom of association and peaceful assembly".*

## **African Union's African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC):**

*Article 4 stipulates that action concerning children must take their best interests into consideration. Taking children's best interests into consideration implies that they have the right to be heard, and the right to freedom of expression (article 7 any). Article 8 of the ACRWC gives children the right to freedom of association, as well as the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (article 9).*





*In the ECOWAS Strategic Framework for Strengthening National Child Protection Systems, which covers the period 2018–2030, participation is one of ten commitments strengthening partnership, networking, and collaboration between children and youth. Similarly, the ECOWAS Roadmap on Preventing and Responding to Child Marriage highlights the role of children themselves in combating this scourge*

*All this is in line with Aspiration 10 of Agenda 2040 for Africa's children: African children's view matters.[1]*

*These legal instruments, as well as national and international treaties, grant children, either as individuals or as associative groups such as the network of working children and young people known as the AMWCY, the legitimacy to defend their interests and demand accountability from decision-makers and duty-bearers.*

*Participation is therefore enshrined as a fundamental right for children, as well as one of the general principles guiding the implementation of all children's rights.*

[1] African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, *Agenda 2040 for Africa's Children*, pages 58–59.



*But does the "obliged child participation" derive exclusively from conventions and legal texts? Drawing on the expertise of individuals who work with or in support of children, the numerous unsuccessful attempts of aid-based initiatives compel us to pursue the meaningful involvement of children. After all, children in Africa make up the constant and active majority of the population.*

*Culturally, they are in a position of "respect" towards the older generations, but their demographic weight in a difficult context compels them to play an economic, social and even "political" role in the tensions that are shaking the continent.*





*Whether considered good or bad depending on the initiative, child participation is a basic fact of life in Africa. And in this case, it's fair to ask, between the adult and the child, who participates in the action of the other. Another argument in favor of child participation is that children are expected to play important roles in adulthood. Their participation in processes that engage them individually or collectively on a societal level contributes to their sense of responsibility.*

*Child participation therefore remains a process of learning responsibility.*

*In 1994, the Working Children and Youth (WCY), meeting at their General Assembly for the 1st time in Bouaké, inspired by their own experience, identified the 12 rights that perfectly illustrate the implementation of the CRC and the ACRWC. (Cf. jeuda 104, 12 WCY rights). These include the right to be listened to and the right to express and organize oneself, which enable working children to bring to life what for adults remains a concept: "participation".*

*Although significant progress has been made in promoting child rights and participation, challenges and disparities remain. However, the cultural context remains a major obstacle to achieving this goal. The AMWCY, supported by Enda Jeunesse Action, in collaboration with its partners, recently commissioned two consultants to study and explore the systematization of children's participation and the associated challenges in West, East and Central Africa, particularly at the level of the AMWCY and other institutions working with or in contact with children.*



# Barriers to child participation



Factors such as cultural norms, socio-economic conditions and limited resources can hamper children's meaningful participation.

## a) Political agenda

*Despite the fact that in several countries, the right to participation is fully recognized in legislation, practical provisions do not exist or allotted for its realization: There remains a panoply of difficulties linked mainly to bureaucracy, lack of political will and a certain fear of power-sharing with rights-holders. Even at the local level, participation is not yet part of everyday practice [2]*

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*“It’s hard to get an appointment with a politician... They’re always travelling. In my opinion, they think more about themselves than us!”*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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[2] Plan, the Concerned for working children, Unicef, World Vision, Save the Children, 2014, A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children's Participation - n. 1 Introduction, pages 6-7.





*There are no systematic spaces and processes for democratic exchange between children, young people and adult decision-makers.[3]*

*Even when participation experiences are organized, it's not clear that children's opinions are taken into account seriously.*



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*“Even the Participatory Development Plans are made without having the children’s point of view... The authorities don’t include the children in the decision-making, for example where to build a school...”*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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[3] Plusieurs sources, par exemple Save the Children South Africa, 2018, National Child Participation framework.



## *b) Cultural and behavioral factors*

*« We are gradually being discriminated against... Parents don't give us the privilege of expressing ourselves»... ».[4]*

*Children frequently mentioned the presence of invisible barriers, in local contexts where the idea that children shouldn't talk when there are adults around is still very much followed.*

*Adults may imagine that children are neither interested in nor capable of exercising certain types of responsibility.[5]*

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*"Even when you're with your mother and she's teaching you to cook, she tells you: look, don't ask too many questions...*

*Observation is predominant in our culture..."*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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[4] Boy, FGD n. 6, Libéria.

[5] The African Child Policy Forum, 2015, A study on child participation in Eastern Africa, page 45.



### c) Gender weight

The weight" of gender begins with the lack of empowerment in the home, and of course continues with women's absence from political and economic management.

Cultural and patriarchal norms tend to relegate women to the background and fail to open up spaces and roles for them in public life.

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*"It's mostly for girls... They don't feel comfortable talking,  
even if they have good ideas"*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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## d) Adult/child “Dichotomy”

*In this category of barriers, there are the factors that prevent the realization of the right to participation because of the same societal structure, and the "natural" reluctance of adults, who don't see children as interlocutors on an equal footing:*

*[children] "are not mature enough until 18 - say adults..."), [6] and don't have the capacity and experience to take part in child participation initiatives. Adults don't want to share their power space with children, especially if they expect opinions they don't agree with.*

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*"Breaking down barriers is difficult! They're afraid of us, because we advocate for our rights".*

**CHILDREN -  
AMWCY**

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[6] Homme, Entretien n. 4.





## e) Lack of continuity and harmonisation

*Participation should not be the isolated affair of a few cooperation or humanitarian aid projects, but should be much more cross-cutting.*

*The very logic of the architecture of international cooperation and humanitarian aid is an obstacle to the realization of child participation, where projects are discontinuous, have precise limits in terms of available time and resources,[7] and must obey the priorities set by donors. [8]*

*And when several partners try to engage with the same children through different projects, it can also lead to a certain amount of participation fatigue.[9]*

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*“Participation isn't about getting children to do something... We set up projects, then we come, create a club, leave, that's it...”*

**CHILDREN -  
AMWCY**

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*“Each organization and entity have its own procedures... the result is that the participation process is fragmented in the region...».*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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[7] Save the Children, 2009, *Putting children at the center - A practical guide to children's participation*, page 23.

[8] The Alliance, 2020, *A reflective field-guide Community-level approaches to child protection in humanitarian action*, page 10.

[9] Femme, *Entretien n. 10.*





## *f) Monitoring and visibility of participation*

*As recognized in the literature, there is a lack of tools and standards for measuring child participation, from the perspective of its effectiveness and accountability. [10]The result is a lack of concrete evidence to show the full benefits of participation.*

*In other words, in recent years there have been proposals for participation standards, tools, indicators and guidelines to bridge this gap, but they are not systematically applied.[11]*



[10] *The African Child Policy Forum, 2015, A study on child participation in Eastern Africa, page 47.*

[11] *Plan, the Concerned for working children, Unicef, World Vision, Save the Children, 2014, A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children's Participation – n. 1 Introduction, page 7.*



## *g) Risk factors*

In certain political and conflict contexts, and for certain actions such as visible advocacy, children taking part in initiatives could run risks associated with their activism or visibility; or, in even stable contexts, they could be victims of discrimination. It is therefore necessary to always take into account the possible ethical risks that participation creates. [12]

In view of the above explanations, there is still a great deal of confusion surrounding the implementation of child participation, as many actors directly involved in the field do not really understand how to translate it into reality. [13] Furthermore, in some cases, children's voices are not sufficiently taken into account, or their participation is symbolic rather than meaningful.

[12] Save the Children, 2009, *Putting children at the center – A practical guide to children's participation*, page 46.

[13] Clare Back for Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University, 2013, *Little Voices: Child Participation in Programmes for Conflict Affected Children*, page 32.



# *Definition and benefits of children's participation*



For us children, participation means more than just being listened to: it means taking part in a project, giving our opinion and contributing materially or financially to a specific goal.

To participate is to have the opportunity to express one's point of view, in the hope of being heard and taken into account. Participation implies an approach, a learning process in « spaces » where children contribute to finding solutions to their problems.

They come to express their existence, to show themselves useful to their environment (family, community, country), to contribute to a vision, while testing their abilities, experience, know-how and interpersonal skills. Participation can be seen simply as a child's contribution to the vision or mission defined by his or her family, community, national government, etc

Participation is defined as a principle of great importance for children. For example, when children get together to organize games, sports and leisure activities, it's part of their development.





Participation also promotes self-protection: passive children can more easily fall victim to abuse, violence and exploitation at the hands of malicious adults. Belonging to an association gives children social and even legal cover. The idea that through associations, children can contribute to the development of their peers, their communities, and people who are unaware of their rights, nurtures the culture of solidarity, one of Africa's surest values.

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*"Children's participation means not only consulting them and taking their opinions into account, but also and above all making them active players in the decision-making process and its implementation".*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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Participation not only builds confidence and self-esteem in the ability to pursue and achieve certain goals, but also new abilities and skills. [14] In the case of vulnerable or marginalized children, participation is also an antidote to invisibility. Participation brings the spirit of self-mastery,[15] and is an opportunity to transform oneself into a player in one's own life..

[14] Save the Children, 2009, *Putting children at the center - A practical guide to children's participation*, page 6.

[15] Clare Back for Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University, 2013, *Little Voices: Child Participation in Programmes for Conflict Affected Children*, page 4.



In emergency situations, children who are used to participating and self-organizing help to save lives, spread vital messages, care for adults and peers, and rebuild their communities. [16] In the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding, it is essential to engage children and young people to break the continuous cycles of violence that occur in a society. [17]

Moreover, participation can be seen as a bridge to other rights, and gymnastics of citizenship and democracy, through the learning of civic rights and values: the interest children develop in the community and its various issues, the habit of demanding accountability from duty-bearers, the exercise of « being together » and negotiating with other colleagues in the association, and finally, the active practice of solidarity and understanding of others' points of view.

In fact, citizenship is not something that can be learned by oneself, but a constant practice that is an integral part of daily life, [18] and children's citizenship is manifested just as much through their right to participate.

[16] Save the Children, 2009, *Putting children at the center - A practical guide to children's participation*, page 6.

[17] Clare Back for Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University, 2013, *Little Voices: Child Participation in Programmes for Conflict Affected Children*, page 4.

[18] The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020, *A reflective field-guide Community-level approaches to child protection in humanitarian action*, page 86.





## Link between participation and accountability

Participation and accountability are closely linked: children demand that commitments made to them be honored, and this means providing them with the information they need to make the right choices.

From the outset of any initiative involving children and their participation, it is important that they understand the expectations and objectives of the project, not least to avoid future frustrations: it is necessary to give all the necessary explanations in terms of the expectations and limits of the activity, and to build a good basis for accountability. [19]

“

*"Accountability is keeping promises, participation, giving feedback, having a respectful team and being loyal [...]. Be sure to share information with us, because we don't want to get on a moving train, we want to start the journey with you..."*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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[19] Save the Children, 2009, *Putting children at the centre - A practical guide to children's participation*, page 22.





Authorities and decision-makers must commit to using mechanisms that involves children in decisions that have an impact on their lives.[20] This includes participation, but also transparency and communication.



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*"Participation gives another meaning to accountability. Children say that whatever is done must be shared. Without their effective participation, even project objectives are achieved less effectively".*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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[20] Vanessa Currie, Laura H.V. Wright, Helen Veitch, Yana Mayevskaya, and Lindsay Rogers for CPC Learning Network, 2020, *Moving towards Children as Partners in Child Protection in COVID-19 Guide - from Participation to Partnership*, pages 42-43.





From this perspective, children's participation seems essentially to be seen as collective participation. A child practices his citizenship through interaction with other children and adults, and it is important that, during a meeting, he knows how to represent the collective voice of the other children: [21]

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*... Afterwards, it's a group of children who speak, not just one. They speak up, it becomes serious”*

**CHILDREN - AMWCY**

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In reality, the experience of participation is not only important for its collective significance, but also for the child as an individual: it's important to recognize that, when a child expresses opinions on a specific issue at a national or local conference, it's not easy to demonstrate that he or she represents other children.

Even if this is true, the participatory experience of that particular child does not lose its value, and will be based on his or her own life experiences.

[21] Save the Children, 2012, *Children in politics - A collection of 11 inspiring, motivating and suggestive case studies on children's engagement in governance*, page 19



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*"My dream was to become a factory worker. But when I met the MAEJT, I thought: ah ok, I can change the dream... I saw how children were transformed from victims into actors. These are children who, in the eyes of society, have failed, and they have the chance to become role models. Now that I'm almost at the end of my university training, I'm combining it with practical experience."*

*Boy, 26.*

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**CHILDREN - AMWCY**





# *From speeches to practice in children's participation*



Beyond theories and literature, successful initiatives testifying to children's abilities are present and visible in our immediate environment.

There is a whole range of experiments in « Participatory Budgeting », which is defined in one study as a « form of democracy and direct representation, in which citizens and residents propose, discuss and define how a portion of the public budget will be spent »; [22] activism of children and young people, and strengthen their skills to influence the allocation of available resources.

The assertion of rights begins at a local level, and can reach national and trans-national levels. Through organizational dynamics, children realize their rights through concrete actions targeting several of their rights.

There are a number of reporting initiatives on children's rights, including supplementary reports on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and reports on the African Charter. [23] The aim is to comment on the state of implementation of their rights.

The political authorities' consideration of the proposals and solutions put forward by the children's groups begins with the preparation of messages to be exchanged with government officials from local to national level. They initiate processes to monitor implementation of the recommendations through action plans. [24]

[22] Plan International, 2016, *Child Participatory budgeting - a review of global practice*, pages 20-21, traduction propre.

[23] *Femme*, Entretien n. 11.

[24] *Homme*, Entretien n. 5.



Action plans are drawn up to combat violence. In fact, the children use their observations of proven cases to initiate surveys among their peers, with whom they analyze the problems prioritized by themselves before taking action.

Risk prevention and environmental protection, organized children and young activists are full of ideas for promoting actions focused on disaster risk reduction.[25]

Alliances are forged with traditional leaders to achieve specific goals. In humanitarian contexts, children's clubs at community level can, through their actions, save entire populations and lives from disaster.

With these examples, we can note that various organizations and initiatives are striving to promote children's participation in Africa. These efforts involve empowering children, providing them with platforms to make their voices heard, and defending their rights at local, national and international levels. However, the actual implementation of these rights and policies can vary.

[25] UNDRR, 2020, *Engaging children and youth in disaster risk reduction and resilience building*, page 53.





# Children hence take positions



We children want authorities, decision-makers and stakeholders to take our participation seriously, translating it into a practical approach and ensuring that our voices are not only heard, but valued and taken into account. In our view, children's participation is needed in a variety of development areas to ensure that our voices are heard, that our engagement has an impact and that our rights are respected.



Here are some of these areas :



## Education :

Children's participation is essential in educational policy-making, program development and school management. Children should have a say in decisions that affect their learning environment, including teaching methods, resources and extra-curricular activities.





## Health :

Children's participation in health-related decisions is essential to address their specific needs and concerns. Involving children in discussions on health services, prevention strategies and access to quality health care, as well as on adolescent sexual and reproductive health, can lead to better outcomes and improved health status for children.



## Child protection and rights :

Children's participation is essential in child protection issues, including laws, policies and interventions to prevent and respond to child exploitation, abuse and violence. Children must be involved in the design and implementation of programs and initiatives aimed at promoting their rights and guaranteeing their safety.





## Environment and climate change :

Children have an important role to play in issues of environmental sustainability and climate change. Their participation in discussions and decision-making on environmental policies, conservation efforts and climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies are crucial to a sustainable future..



## Social and community development:

Involving children in community development initiatives can foster their sense of belonging, empowerment and active citizenship. Involving children in community decision-making processes, such as urban planning, infrastructure development and social protection programs, can lead to more inclusive, child-friendly communities



## Justice and legal systems:

Children's participation is essential to the development of legal systems and policies that protect children's rights and guarantee their access to justice. Children should have the opportunity to contribute to the development of laws, procedures and mechanisms that respond to their specific needs and ensure the establishment and operation of a child-friendly justice system that respects children's rights.

We children require stakeholders to ensure that our participation is inclusive and representative of our diversity. Include children from all backgrounds, including those from marginalized communities. Recognize and take into account the particular challenges and barriers we may face in our participation, and offer equal opportunities to all.



## Key messages for stakeholders:



- 1 “Include us from the beginning, not as an afterthought.”
- 2 “Listen to us, value our opinions, and take them seriously.”
- 3 “Empower us to take ownership of our own future.”
- 4 “Provide us with accessible and age-appropriate information.”
- 5 “Collaborate with us as partners in decision-making.”
- 6 “Create safe and respectful spaces for us to express ourselves.”
- 7 «Support us by providing resources and opportunities for growth.»
- 8 “Ensure our participation is inclusive and representative of our diversity.”
- 9 “Be accountable to us for your commitments and promises”



## Conclusion



Seen from Africa, meaningful child participation is essential to children's development and well-being. It represents real hope. As children, we have the right to be heard and to participate actively in the decisions and activities/programs that affect our lives. The development models tried up to now have never been able to harness the essential resources of children's energy and creativity.

By implementing the positions presented in this document, stakeholders can bridge the gaps in children's participation and create an environment in which our voices are valued, respected and taken into account. Creating respectful and safe spaces and platforms, including all strata without discrimination, empowering and supporting child-led initiatives are good levers for development.

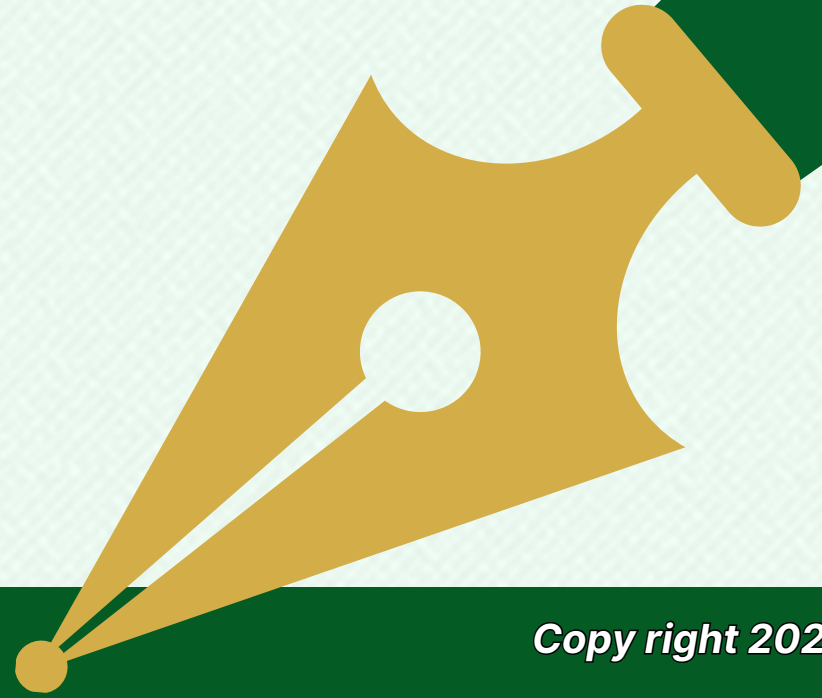
These levers offer various opportunities for African children to learn, deploy their energy and contribute to the development of a society they have helped to create through their own dreams and aspirations, and not those of other rich and distant continents to be lived by all means. This is why institutions wishing to support African children must encourage the development of children's participation within and beyond their programs, supporting their organization and thus contributing to their protagonism.







***MAEJT Afrique***



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