

PIDIDA

Day of General Discussion "The Child's Right to be Heard"

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

The **PIDIDA Coalition** wishes to contribute to the yearly meeting of the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**, to share some insight from the Italian experience deriving from the analysis of one regional project, as a part of a broader National project, carried out with children to monitor the situation of children and adolescents.

Introduction **PIDIDA**¹ – **Italian Coalition on the rights of the Child and the Adolescent**, is a free panel discussion open to all the NGO's, Associations and Third-Sector organizations operating to promote and support the rights of children and adolescents in Italy and abroad. PIDIDA adopts the Convention on the rights of the Child and "**A world fit for children**", which was introduced by the **UN-GA Special Session**, as working tools and promotes their implementation.

PIDIDA started in 2000, when the **Italian Committee for UNICEF** invited the other associations dealing with children and adolescents to contribute to the preparatory process of the **United Nation General Assembly Special Session on children** (New York, May 2002). More than thirty participating organizations established a goal to work together and arrange common documents and ideas in order to participate to such an international meeting.

Through framework of PIDIDA, the main associations worked to promote the active participation of Italian children and adolescents: after constituting a workgroup on this topic, they organized – thanks to the support of the **Italian Ministry of Work and Social Security** –the **2001 National Forum of Adolescents**, and helped the Adolescents' participation to the New York Children's forum, and sent two of their representatives as official delegation at the **UN-GA Special Session on children**.

The activity with children and adolescents has continued through the years: in the framework of the 2002 National Forum, adolescents were able to submit to the **Italian Ministry of Work and Social Security** one document containing their "**Ideas for National childhood action plan fit for children**". Below is an extract from the draft²:

"It is only thanks to the right to participate that we succeeded in preparing such a draft, which means for us to exercise our right of expression, to be listened to, and to be respected by means of dialogue and confrontation. In this way, we can demonstrate to be able to constructively contribute in solving the problems they directly concern ourselves.

According to our group, participating is taking care, discussing, listening, making our own voice to be heard, fighting and then reaching an agreement. Briefly, this means to put ourselves into play. It is everyone's right to participate and it is important to trust yourself for what you can do. Participating is becoming able, and realizing, to represent even who is not able to participate.

Participating is eliminating the barriers amongst people, involving people and feeling yourself to be involved with reciprocal respect, to exist with your consciousness of living while giving your own contribute in confrontation, exchanging ideas, opinions and experiences to grow together".

Since PIDIDA Coalition was made permanent its activities are mainly structured in **Working groups**:

- **The workgroup on the UN-GA Special Session** is devoted to verify the fulfillment of what undersigned in the "**A world fit for children**" document, in light of the principles sanctioned by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC).

¹ At the moment, the following associations are adhering to the PIDIDA panel: A.Ge., AGESCI, Ai.Bi, AIDOS, ALISEI, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL-Sezione Italiana, ANFAA, ARCIRAGAZZI, Associazione KIM, Associazione NESSUN LUOGO E' LONTANO, Associazione OSSERVATORIO SUI MINORI, AVSI, AZIONE CATTOLICA ITALIANA, CENTRO ALFREDO RAMPI, Centro Studi MINORI&MEDIA, CIAI, CIES, CISMAI, COCIS, Coordinamento LA GABBIANELLA, ECPAT-Italia, FIVOL, FOCSIV, IBFAN-Italia, Istituto F.SANTI, ItaliaNATs, Italia Nostra, LEGAMBIENTE, MAIS, MANITese, MLAL, OVCI, SAVE THE CHILDREN-Italia, TERRE des HOMMES-Italia, UNICEF-Italia, VIS.

- **The workgroup on the survey of the CRC Convention** promotes the organization of thematic sessions of survey and the adoption of common documents on arguments related to the rights of the child and the adolescent.
- **The workgroup on Participation** promotes meditation and training of technicians of the different member associations Centred on how to promote participation, how to allow the Italian children and adolescents to evaluate the degree of application of the CRC in their Country and how to facilitate dialogue with public institutions.

Working group 2 : Children as active participants to the society

Introduction In the last few years the Italian Institutional architecture has been deeply modified, also on what concern the competencies on childhood and adolescence. Especially, with the modifications of **Comma V** in the second part of the **Italian Constitution (Constitutional Law 3/2001)**, social policies became an exclusive Region's competency; the Italian State being qualified in "*determining the basic levels of services concerning civil and social rights to be performed on all the National territory*". Such a change has made difficult the application of **Law 328/2000** ("*Framework Law on the establishment of an integrated system of social interventions and services*", foreseeing well defined interactions amongst the State and the Regions and involving one unified National Fund for the social policies). To some extent, during such a transition phase, what was foreseen by the national laws on matters directly affecting children and adolescents has not been put into effect. Many Regions have been emendating their Laws in light of this situation, while some are implementing what foreseen by the basic national Laws. The situation differs from region to region, and this poses a risk to create conditions of strong inequality for children and the adolescents in benefiting from their rights.

In this framework, the **Project of the PIDIDA Coalition** is located: "*Viaggio alla ricerca dei diritti dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza attraverso le Regioni italiane/ Journey through the Italian Regions in search of children's rights*".

A case study: The "*Journey in search of children's rights*" project

Between 2004 and 2005 the PIDIDA Coalition experienced the "*Journey in search of children's rights*" pilot project. The "*Journey*" started with the **goal to monitor what was done for children and adolescents by each region** and to evaluate whether and when the administrative **decentralization** was warranting the same opportunities to children and adolescents in each Region of Italy.

In the first year of testing the project, two "sample" Italian regions were selected for the purpose of verifying the instruments and procedures through which the two regions were implementing: the rights sanctioned by the **1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child**; the **provisions in force** (with specific reference to **Law 285/1997** "Provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for children and youth" and **Law 451/1997** "Establishment of a Parliamentary Commission on Childhood and of a National Childhood Monitoring Center").

The questionnaire On the basis of **the Concluding Observations on Italy by the Committee on the Rights of the Child** and of **UNICEF's** document "*Building child-friendly cities*", a **questionnaire** was drawn up and subsequently sent to the regional **Offices for social policies**, to the **regional Educational Offices** and to the **Children's Ombudsman** of the Regions that established them. **The questionnaire** was divided into **five sheets**, each one dedicated to the following topics: 1) knowledge and diffusion of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; 2) cooperation between scholastic and non-scholastic entities; 3) closing of the institutes; 4) policies for foreign children; 5) international commitment of the region to children (decentralized cooperation and education to development programs). With regards to each topic, certain subjects were treated in a cross cutting manner: ***the participation of children and youth, the non-discrimination; the coordination between associations and institutions; between national, regional and local agencies, the available resources.***

The report

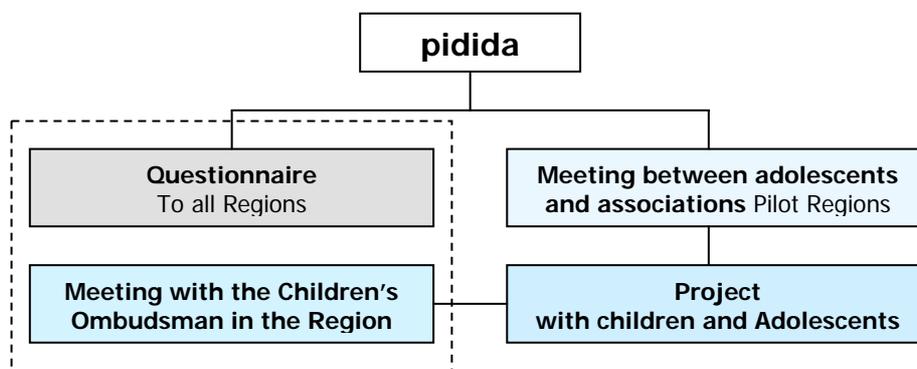
On June 9, 2005, the **project's final report** was presented during an official presentation hosted by the Municipality of Rome. This report was based on information provided to the PIDIDA Coalition through filling out of the questionnaire and on the basis of information collected on institutional web sites and from other sources. It was also based on the information that became known during the **meetings held in the two selected regions between the children and the associations working in the area, the teachers and the sector operators.**

The 2006 Project

Given the results obtained during the first edition, **PIDIDA Coalition** decided to repeat the experience of the "*Journey in search of children's rights*" by launching the **2006** project edition, this time with the **goal of: monitoring regional policies in favor of children and youth in all Regions**; by carrying out an ensuing in-depth program in three new specific Regions; **verifying the evolution of the same policies in the two Regions which were the focus of the previous edition.**

Unlike the first edition, it was decided to organize the "*Journey*" in two parts:

- **the first one** involved the sending of the **questionnaire to all the regions**,
- **while the second part** focused on the **meetings between children and associations, foreseen only in the "pilot" regions²**, which will be concluded at the **end of 2006.**



Part I - *The Questionnaire*

As in 2005, a **questionnaire** was prepared, divided into **nine sheets** each one dedicated to: **the participation of children and youth**; child and youth-friendly legislative framework; strategy for children's rights; coordination mechanisms for children's rights; assessment and analysis of the impact on childhood; regional budget dedicated to childhood; regular Report on the condition of childhood; diffusion of the knowledge of children's rights; an independent institution for childhood.

The questionnaire was sent to all the **regional Offices for Social Policies of all the Italian regions**, with the request to fill it out, if possible, in cooperation with the **departments** and/or with other **pertinent Offices/Agencies** (for example; the regional Scholastic Office, the regional Childhood Monitoring Centre and the regional Children's Ombudsman, if established).

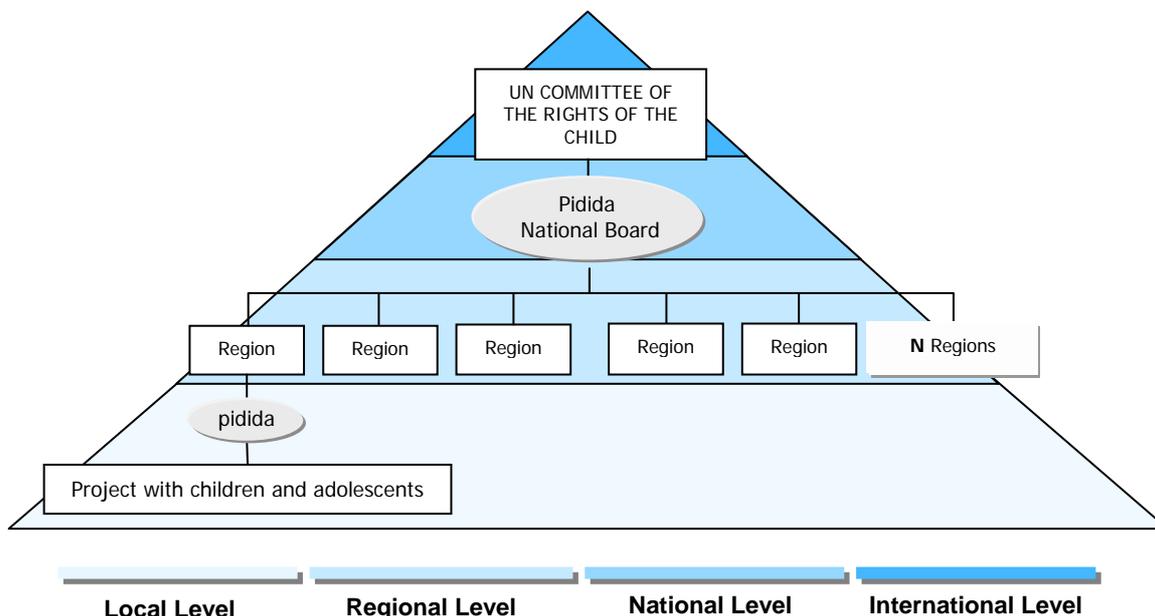
Results of the questionnaire

From an analysis of the questionnaire the results, related **to the participation of children and youth**, emerged that the principle sanctioned by **art. 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child** is implemented various levels in local governments. An interesting turmoil of initiatives is recorded throughout the entire nation, with certain significant experiences, in particular in those Regions that have already appointed a Children's Ombudsman³. Although not uniformly implemented throughout the territory, different training and awareness projects aimed at spreading a culture that respects the children's right to be heard and to participate, and intended for operators who work with children and youth have been undertaken.

² Veneto, Lazio, Campania, Lombardia and Puglia

³ Friuli Venezia Giulia, Marche and Veneto. In the Abruzzo and Basilicata regions it is UNICEF Regional Committee that carries out this task. In Lazio the nomination is currently underway. Five regions are working at a bill on the subject: Campania, Liguria, Molise, Puglia, and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano.

The graph (below) wishes to highlight the **structure of the project "Journey in search of children's rights"**, and how this project is part of a **course** that started with the Special Session of 2002 and that will lead in **2008** to the drawing up of a **Report on the application of the CRC in Italy carried out with children**, and how it is, *in fieri*, the bearing structure.



The participation of children is implemented in multiple areas, inviting them to make decisions and undertake actions that closely affect them, from their private life, starting with the family, to the public sphere. A course aimed at reaching an **authentic participation** that enhances children and youth within an interactive relationship with others and within the context in which they live, so that they can be active participants in the making of *a world in which they would like to live*.

Journey in search of children's rights, organized by PIDIDA workgroup on children's participation

The Context

It is very important to speak about the different contexts in which the participation process is realized. Ties and perceptions, are joined to the history, the culture, the identity, the social and economic conditions and the presence of vulnerable groups in the society. Each element has significant effects on participation experiences.

The diffusion and the knowledge of the **article 12** of the **CRC**, in Veneto Region, was realised thanks to the activities promote by the **Ombudsman**⁴ of Veneto Region. His Office promoted, in these years, different projects with the aim to favour the knowledge and the improvement of participative experiences for children, as *Municipal Children and Councils*, and informative experiences as newspapers and television programs for children. Other participation experiences are related to the scholastic world, important place in which young people can meet their peers and the adults. In 2005, the Office promoted the constitution of "*listening groups*" formed by students, aiming to provide comments about the Office's programming.

At the end of the PIDIDA Projects "*Journey in search of children's rights*", some children met the **Ombudsman** who listened to their recommendations.

The Project 2005

During the first year, the children who took part in the initiatives, discussed the theme of **social exclusion**. The project was started and developed from the desire of a "*Journey*" for the discovery of personal rights through participation, as a process of growing and increasing knowledge of ones own rights and social dynamics but also as assumption of responsibility that can recognize the contribution of every child that, in this way, became a protagonist.

⁴ Established with Regional Law, 9th August, n. 42.

The Report submitted to the **Ombudsman**, at the end of first year:

"We would that the right to express our opinion became substantial and informal; this implies the listening of adults because we have a dignity;

We would that the world of adults become aware about our problems and reality;

We would know the tools we have to suggest our ideas, so we would a simple language but we don't be treated as infants.

We would that the intercultural projects are exploited in the school, so we can know foreign cultures, people and histories. This education to the differences will allow to avoid the phenomenon of social exclusion.;

We would be active participants in our issues and in the participation project, so we would have more consideration of adults;

At the end, we would that the right to education is guaranteed to all children with a special attention to all immigrant children".

Subsequently, two children participated in the presentation of **National Report** of the project to present their recommendations.

The Project 2006

This year the theme of the Project was been the **right to participation**. Two Meetings have been organized in Padova, with about 30 children (15-18)⁵, from some provinces of Veneto and *PIDIDA* Associations.

The **First Meeting** began with a moment on the knowledge of the CRC, and in particular, on "*group of articles on participation*". Subsequently, there was a moment of reflection, according to the methodology of direct experience:

EXPERIENCE > STAGE OF LEARNING > REFLECTION > SEARCH OF SENSE > INTERIORIZED LEARNING

Six adults accompanied the children during the meetings, as facilitators⁶. In the second session of work, the children developed together their project and defined contents, ways, timing and tools of realization.

During the afternoon, the children, interacted in three groups, prepared a questionnaire, on the theme of rights of children, and proposed to their peers. The first group worked on the **theme of participation within the school**; the second one within **the family** environment and the third one within the **free time**. Sharing own ideas and knowledge, during the workshop, stimulated children to have a comparison with their peers.

During the **Second Meeting**, children elaborated the answers of the questionnaire gathered, and analysed the results, and prepared a final **Report** which was submitted to the Ombudsman of Veneto Region.

A delegation of children had a meeting with the Delegate of Ombudsman of Veneto Region, in which the results of the questionnaire was presented. The Office of the Ombudsman, invited children to collaborate in the creation of an official website, an open space of active participation.

Project Evaluation

Within the scope of analyzing the project results, special attention was paid to the assessment of a more qualitative nature of the work performed. For this purpose, a *focus group* was established with a few operators for the purpose of identifying the main strong points and weaknesses.

Negative Aspects, Project weak points

- Logistical difficulties due to the geographical dislocation and the difficulty in finding the youth and maintaining a constant level of interaction over time.

⁵ A special thank you to all children who have participated: Andrea C., Alessandra C., Chiara M., Jessica M., Anna B, Demetria S., Monica P., Claudia R., Ilaria B.,Viola D., Giovanna L., Laura D, Sara B.,Martina P.,Mariagrazia B,Silvia M.,Serena F.,Claudio V., Rober.D.C., Martina D.P, Ivan F., Victor, Serena B., Maria M., Stefano M.,Camilla F., Luigi C., Luca Z., Maria T.

⁶ Pidida : Innocenza Indelicato e Maria Teresa De Riz (Amnesty International-Italy); Anna Gimma (UNICEF- Italy), Lorenzo Bocchese (Arciragazzi) , Stefania Pinel (AGESCI), Anna Maria Romanelli (Italia Nostra). A particular thanks to Lucio Strumendo, Ombudsman of Veneto Region and Paolo De Stefani (Associazione Diritti Umani).

- Poor representation of vulnerable groups, for example the foreign working minors.
- Total lack of financial support for the project.

Positive aspects, Project strong points

- The project succeeded in bringing together youth coming from different geographic and social settings.
- The youth and the organizers developed a positive group atmosphere, which is vital for adolescents, an environment based on respect, sharing and dialogue.
- The project started from the youth's personal experiences, it lent them an ear and reconnected them to a concrete, practical and enjoyable activity.
- Together, the youth and the organizers found strong motivations to carry on with the project on a continuous basis.
- Budget size is not a factor that guarantees the success of a project. Although financial resources are necessary and fundamental, a project carried out without any financial backing is a good example of how the richness of energies, physical and emotional, of the motivation, availability, involvement and will of the youth and of the adults can make, all the same, for a significant experience.
- The project succeeded in building a good network strategy between the associations working for children and youth throughout the territory, among which public institutions, between the youth and the region's institutions, thus creating an important channel of communication and reciprocal listening.
- The project was carried out by the same reference figures that have constantly accompanied the execution of the participative report.
- Participation was not only the process content, but also the work style. Participation, as a work style, as a method that characterizes all the work carried out with the youngsters. In this way the participative dimension can overcome the logic of the project itself and can gradually fit into the daily actions carried out in the different settings.

On the whole, a decisively positive assessment emerged, especially in terms of the educational importance of the participative process. A learning and growing experience which, as it was being carried out, met the youth's vital worlds: family, school, free time, relationships with peers, community life, territory.

Conclusion

Participation is a basic Human Right: all people, including children, have the right to express their own opinion on the decisions that affect them.

Child participation must be considered as the freedom to express personal opinion everyday, the right to be heard, and the freedom to gather; child participation must promote: individuality, initiative, decision making and active citizenship. Direct participation allows to appreciate the democracy and to develop the capacity to exercise it.

In deed, it is only through direct participation that children and adolescent may actually understand democracy and realize how important is not only to participate, but also to develop their ability to do that.

Participation of adolescents must occur in their living context and daily life: in the families, schools, and associations. Mechanisms of continuity should be activated there, taking place of casual projects and unfruitful events, by means of continuous relationships of cooperation with their peers and the adults.

In this way, subjective approaches may be surpassed in order to reach a collective level of approach, getting consciousness on the concept that routes of real participation can only be implemented in the framework of common contexts of life.

On the basis of these fundamental premises and of the path traveled in recent years, the **PIDIDA Coalition workgroup on children's participation** has identified some indications and recommendations for a bona fide participation of the children and the youth.

They are "*best practices*", commitment directions that can be useful for the implementation of participation projects for and with the children.

Recommendations

The PIDIDA Coalition workgroup on children's participation recommends that:

1. The participation projects should not be designed as a pre-defined and unchanging entity, but rather shaped according to the needs and expectations of the youngsters. Consequently, a working approach in which the children and youngsters become the real protagonists, capable of contributing innovative ideas and intervening first-hand for the successful continuation of the project, should be thought.

2. The youngsters do not represent a unitary group. They have different backgrounds tied to their culture and to their life experiences. Therefore, it is recommended that access to information be guaranteed to everyone, without any discriminations. Specifically, the measures should aim at reaching the highest possible level of accessibility by implementing the principle of "universal design", according to which every activity has to take into account the various requirements of potential users. Consequently, all assisting technologies and aids have to be employed in order to eliminate any type of barrier.

3. The participating experiences need to continue in all settings and spheres of the youngsters' lives and within meaningful relations. The participation presumes, in this sense, the meaning of staking one's all, of taking risks in order to discover capabilities and limits, potentials and constraints, either personal or collective.

4. Each participation project has to have adequate resources, not only in financial and human terms, but also in terms of time, which is fundamental to guarantee the success of a project. It is necessary a timing planned with the youngsters in full respect of their requests and needs.

5. It is important to take into account the adults' training, which translates into common methods, goals and intentions. The operator, in this sense, should present himself as a meaningful figure capable of cooperating and collaborating with the youngsters, expressing adequate skills at the relationship and communication level: real listening, a welcoming attitude, flexibility, lack of prejudices, ability to endure and handle conflicts.

The Report and the Recommendations of the Children

On March 19th we met in Padova, with representatives from some provinces of Veneto, invited by some PIDIDA associations. We discussed the CRC and proposed a questionnaire regarding school environment, family and free time, to our peers. On May 14th we met a second time to analyse the 241 questionnaires gathered. We discussed the results and tried to interpret them.

School

The research underlines that a lot of interviewees would have a better relationship with teachers, to investigate thoroughly topical and interesting problems. We would have scholastic structures more accessible and with a more manageable time. We would organize and participate in extra-scholastic activities as theatre, music, cinema, dance.

We, the children, recommend that:

1: Teachers listening and helping us to administrate our activities.

Family

The research underlines that Italian family is changing negatively. We have reflected on the answers about the parents' neglect toward their children: a third of interviewees told that in their family children rights are not respected. Moreover, we underline that:

- *a few number of interviewees said that family problems must stay in the family;*
- *a good number of interviewees said that, in case of separation of parents, children don't know who to ask legal and psychological help.*

2: We would have more information about these issues.

Free Time

The research underlines that young people think that they not have a lot of free time. They would spend their time with their friend to speak about their problems. Despite this need, young people frequent crowded places as pubs and bar that don't encourage communication; more acceptable the indication of parks and public gardens.

3: We would have places dedicated to young people in which we can administrate our activities and listening spaces in which adults listen to our problems and needs.

The knowledge of the CRC

About the first question on the knowledge of the CRC, the interviewees have answered that they don't know the Convention.

4 : We think that there is important to spread the knowledge of the CRC.

Project's valuation

We think that our meetings were useful because they were an input for us to express our voice on the important issues; moreover we are aware of there is someone that listening our problems.

Thanks to this experience we have learnt to respect and listen different opinions; we have involve other people to participate, by the questionnaire, to our research.

We think that is important to know the problem of our peers because only through the knowledge of this reality, we can find a solution for the problems.

5 : We, children, recommend that there be other opportunities to meet and to participate.