

Child Rights Governance

Children's views on using their civil and political rights

Child friendly report based on research done by the Centre
for Children's Rights Belfast University and the Child Rights
Governance Global Theme, Save the Children, 2016

What were we trying to find out?

We wanted to find out what children from across the world thought about how they were able to use their civil and political rights in public (e.g. in their community, in their schools etc.). Civil and political rights are things like:

- Your right to get information.
- Your right to express your views freely.
- Your right to have your views paid attention to by people who make decisions that affect your life.
- Your right to take part in a group or activities, e.g. a youth parliament, campaign or protest.

This is a report of what we found out.



Most of the children who took part in this research were involved in 'civic action' (projects trying to make a difference for children). Many of these children had positive experiences. We must remember, there are many children across the world who did not take part and their experiences might be different.



How did we find out what children thought?

We used two different ways to find out what children from across the world thought:

1. We set up an on-line survey: 937 children aged 11 to 17 from 58 countries answered the survey.
2. Group discussions ("Focus Groups"): We set up group discussions with children in 12 countries. 669 children aged 8-17 participated in these.

What did we find out?

Are children interested?

Most of the children who took part in the survey said they had some interest in the decisions made by government about things happening in their community, country or the world (see below). The children in the group discussions also offered some interesting comments.

“Once a girl was set to be married off against her will, and she sought our help. These incidents make us feel important and further motivate us to work.”

- Boy, 16, Asia-Pacific

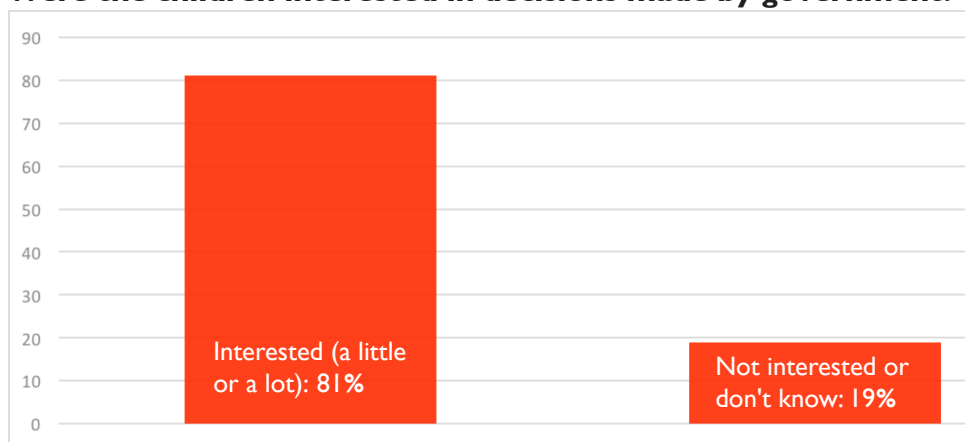
“Parents do not want their daughters to attend school. They say ‘don’t pollute their minds.’”

- Girl, 13, Asia-Pacific

“We were thinking about the children from communities that don’t have a space where they can play and there wasn’t anyone to speak for them.”

- Girl, 13, Latin America

Were the children interested in decisions made by government?



The children who answered our questions were involved in taking action on lots of different issues like:

- When children are forced to marry;
- Compulsory dowries (making girls' families pay to get married);
- Being physically punished in schools;
- Children having to work to earn money for their families;
- Girls having to cope with inappropriate sexual behaviour towards them;
- Problems with transport, communicating with others and getting access to things you need;
- Traditions that treat people unfairly (“discriminatory practices”);
- Keeping people safe in the case of natural disasters, like floods and earthquakes;
- Getting governments to pay attention to children’s views.

Children got involved because they knew about their rights, and/or they saw things that were wrong that they wanted to put right.

But there were lots of things that stopped children from getting involved:

- They didn't know how to;
- They didn't have enough resources (things to help them);
- They were afraid;
- Someone told them not to get involved;
- They felt it wouldn't do any good anyway.

"Having access to and getting to know what's going on is a problem even for an elderly person, let alone children."

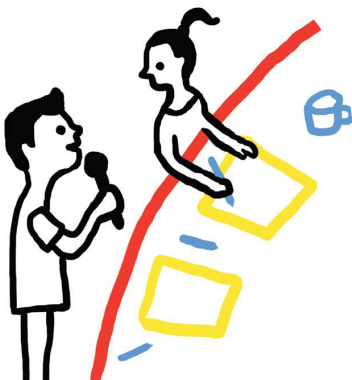
- Boy, 15, Africa

"Some issues like child marriages are difficult to address. Even community elders do not encourage us to discuss those."

- Child, 13, Asia-Pacific

"I saw that nobody wanted to report the problem so I told myself that if they can't do this I have to try. It was a challenge for me, but I did it."

- Child, Latin America



What about children's right to information?

- Most children could get information on-line, but in some countries they couldn't.
- Children sometimes need support from adults to understand information.
- Children said they felt safe looking for information on the issues they were working on in their projects.
- But there were some issues where children didn't feel safe looking for information, such as violence in the home, or if they lived in an area affected by war or conflict.

What about children's right to express views freely?

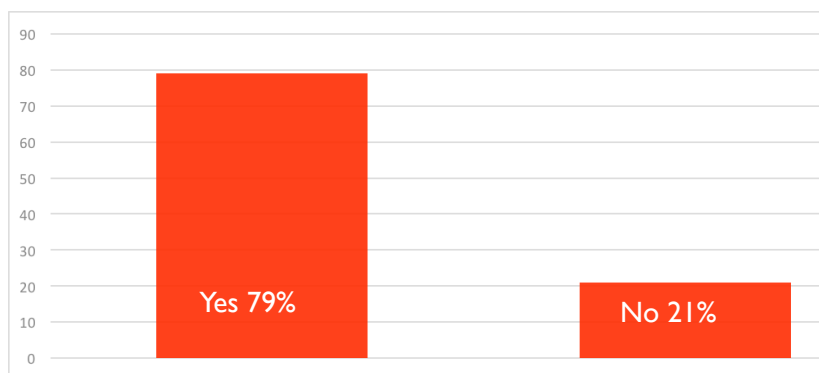
- Less than half of the children surveyed felt they could express their views freely on-line or in public. Some said they did not feel safe doing this.
- Also some children said they have problems when their parents or other adults try to stop them from saying what they think.
- Many children said they felt safe getting involved in activities when they are part of a group set up by an organisation that helped and supported them.
- However, some said they don't feel safe, especially if they are doing activities around drugs, child labour or child marriage.
- Sometimes they don't feel confident to express their views. But the more they get involved in taking action, the more confident they get. Support from the adults who work with them helped too.

What about children's right to have their views taken seriously?

Many children in the survey said they believe that the adults who can change things will listen to them. But many feel these adults will not take them seriously or take any action (see below).



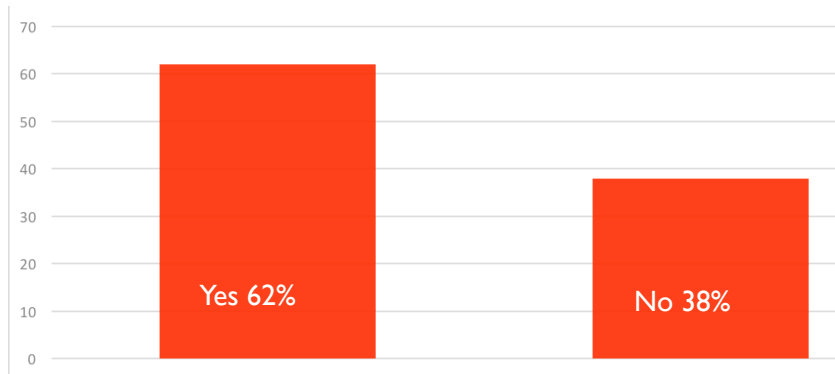
Did the children think adults who could bring about change would listen to them?



"Since the Children's Group has been formed, people in our village have started listening to us and they consider our views. Otherwise they never listen to us."

- Boy, 13, Asia-Pacific

Did the children think adults who could bring about change would do anything about it?



"When we're not listened to, we feel as if we're not worth anything, that what we're saying isn't logical, that it doesn't matter what we think. We feel like a fumigated cockroach."

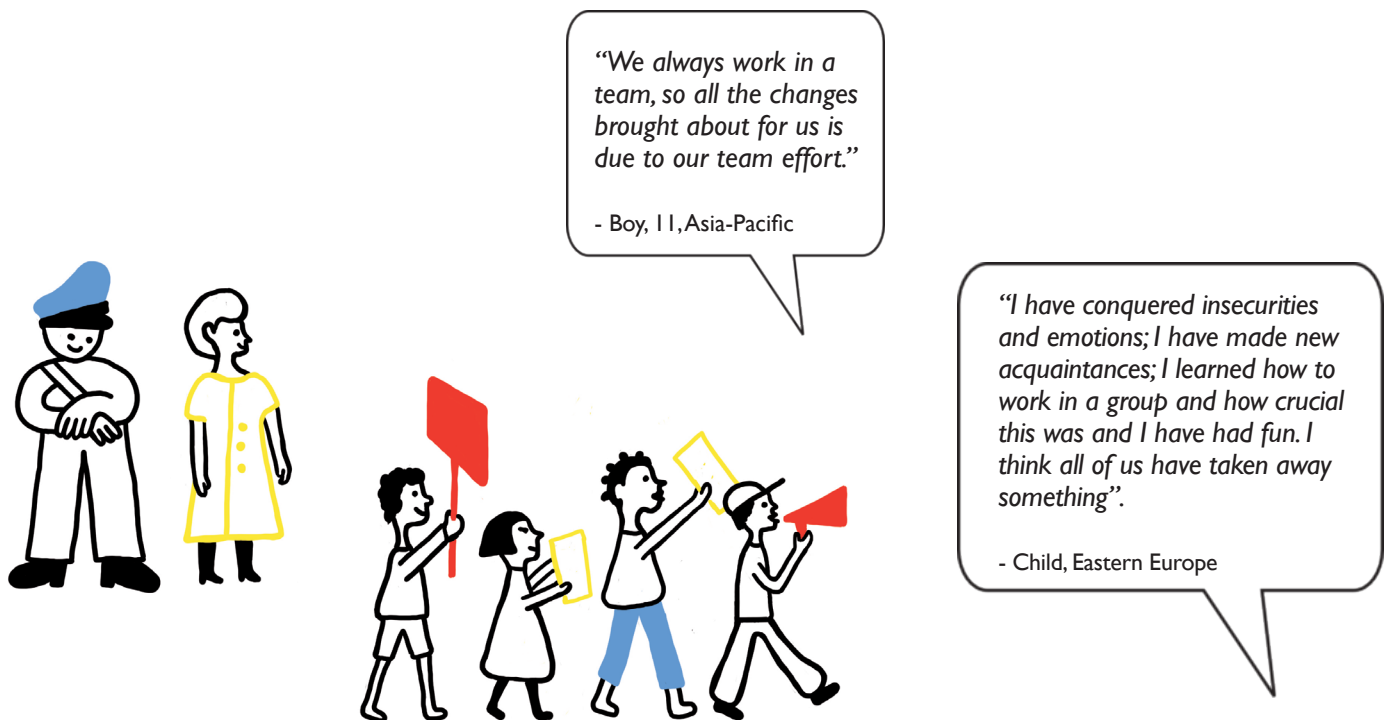
- Child, Latin America

- Children felt they are more likely to be taken seriously when they work together as an organised group.
- Children shared examples of how they were able to influence adult decisions. But they also understood that adults could not always make the changes they asked for.
- Some children felt it is because of their age that they have to work so hard to be taken seriously by adults.



What about children's right to join groups or activities?

- Most children felt they could join a group and would feel safe to do so. But fewer children felt they would be able to set up their own group.
- Those who were already in organised groups felt very positive about the experience.
- Most of the groups they belong to are organised and supported by non-government organisations, though these sometimes work together with government-run organisations.
- Children were aware that some children are less likely to join an organised group, such as those who live in remote areas (that is, areas that are far out or out of the way) where transport is a problem, or working children who have no free time.
- Some also said their parents stop them from meeting others or joining groups.



What about children's right to join peaceful protests?

- Many children felt they can meet freely to discuss issues or take action and feel safe to do this.
- But fewer children felt they would be able to go to a public protest or a demonstration, and many wouldn't feel safe doing this.
- Some children who had been on demonstrations were worried about safety, and said how important it is to have adults from their organisation there to help keep them safe.

"In my country every single move, action or opinion you try is being spotted or observed by the occupation. You can't have the right of protesting without being afraid of getting killed."

- Boy, 16, Asia-Pacific

What support is there for children?

Children chose lots of places they could go to get support for their actions. More children were likely to ask for support from: friends and family, adults in school, children's organisations and youth groups. They said they were least likely to go to politicians to ask for support.

They need support from adults for more difficult tasks like meetings with government officials, and to help them feel more secure and confident.

The support they get from adults includes:

- places to meet and other resources or things they need (including paying for things);
 - teaching them about children's rights, laws and government policies;
 - understanding how adults make decisions, so they can learn how to have a say on these decisions;
- helping them gain new skills and confidence.

But it is important for these adults to pay attention to all the other things children have to do, like school work, particularly exam times.

"In our towns everybody knows us, we are in our home. But when going to national events ... we feel like we are observed with doubt. National institutions are more difficult to reach."

- Child, Eastern Europe

How can adults help?

Children believed more needs to be done on getting adults to take children seriously;

- getting schools to teach children about their rights;
- opportunities for those groups of children who are likely to be left out;
- better links with parents;
- better ways for children to put their views to the government;
- training for children on the issues they want to take action on and the skills they need to take action;
- getting organisations to work with them over a longer time, not just on short projects;
- getting adults who have important roles in their community to work together with children's
- groups in decision-making.

"There needs to be some way that young people can get involved with government and talk to our leaders about the issues that are important for us."

- Girl, 13, W. Europe

"Politicians and people with power need to listen to our opinions and take them seriously."

- Child, Eastern Europe



So, what does all this mean?

Children can get involved in all kinds of civic and political activities at all levels as long as they get support.

However, there are a lot of difficulties to face. Some of these would be the same for adults, like getting information. But others, like not being taken seriously by adults, are difficulties children have to face because they are children and because of the way adults treat them.

Did all children from around the world think the same?

No, there were some differences noticed. Children from Latin America and the Caribbean were more positive compared to the other regions (these were: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe and Others Group). For example, more children from Latin America and the Caribbean:

- Were interested in the decisions made by government;
- Felt able to join a group;
- Felt able and safe to express their views in public.

If you would like to find more about this research, you can visit:

<http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/library/enabling-exercise-civil-and-political-rights-views-children>

If you would like some more information on children's rights and some of the issues presented in this report, you can visit:

<http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/global-themes/child-rights-governance>

And finally, if you need to talk about some of the issues raised in this report, or other issues concerning you, you can find a helpline via this link ('need to talk' tab at the right of the screen):

<http://www.childhelplineinternational.org/Default.aspx>

