

**FROM VOICE TO
INFLUENCE:
STRENGTHENING
CHILDREN'S
PARTICIPATION IN
CLIMATE GOVERNANCE**



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ON THE COVER: Nomin, a World Vision child advocate, being interviewed by media at COP28, where she highlighted the importance of amplifying children's voices at global forums.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The right of children to participate in decisions affecting their lives is firmly established in international law. Through Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), governments have committed to ensuring that children can express their views freely and have those views given due weight according to their age and maturity. Participation has subsequently been reinforced through broader commitments relating to sustainable development, democratic governance, environmental protection and climate action.

Children's participation in climate governance is grounded not only in the CRC but increasingly within international climate policy frameworks. The preamble to the Paris Agreement recognises the importance of respecting, promoting and considering human rights, including the rights of the child, when taking action to address climate change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) processes has also increasingly recognised the role of children and young people in climate action through processes such as Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) and successive COP decisions. More recently, the cover decision adopted at COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh recognised children and youth as agents of change and highlighted the importance of meaningful participation in addressing climate change. Together, these developments reinforce the case for embedding children's participation within climate governance systems rather than treating it as an optional or peripheral activity.

Yet despite growing recognition of participation rights, significant gaps remain between commitment and implementation. Climate change illustrates these gaps particularly clearly. Decisions taken today regarding climate adaptation, resilience, biodiversity, food systems, energy transitions and environmental governance will shape children's lives for decades to come. Children are increasingly visible within climate debates, consultations and international forums such as the UN Climate Change Convention annual Conference of Parties (COPs). However, opportunities to influence decisions remain far more limited. Children are increasingly heard, but they are not always able to influence the institutions and processes where decisions are ultimately made.

Recognition of children's participation rights has advanced considerably in international law and policy. The remaining challenge is building the legal, institutional and accountability mechanisms that transform participation from consultation into influence. Most importantly, it requires moving from participation projects towards participation systems capable of translating children's voices into meaningful influence over decisions.

Climate governance demonstrates why this matters. Those who will live longest with the consequences of climate decisions should have meaningful opportunities to influence them. Child participation is therefore not only a matter of rights. It is also a requirement for effective, legitimate and intergenerationally accountable governance.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This policy brief draws on two complementary studies undertaken on behalf of World Vision Ireland examining children's participation in governance. The first explored children's experiences of participating in international climate governance processes, including engagement with UN climate negotiations and related forums. The second examined constitutional recognition of children's participation rights across eight countries, assessing the extent to which domestic legal frameworks give effect to Article 12 of the CRC.

Together, these studies provide insights into both the practice of child participation and the legal, institutional and governance conditions required for participation to translate into meaningful influence. Across both studies a common challenge emerges: while recognition of children's participation rights has expanded considerably, opportunities for children's views to shape decisions remain uneven. This brief examines how governments can move from participation as consultation towards participation as influence in the context of climate governance.

1. Why Child Participation Matters

For much of modern history, children were viewed primarily as recipients of care, protection and services rather than contributors to public decision-making.

The adoption of the CRC marked a fundamental shift in this understanding. Children came to be recognised not only as beneficiaries of rights but also as rights-holders capable of expressing views and contributing to decisions that affect their lives. Participation therefore sits alongside protection and provision as one of the foundational pillars of children's rights.

The rationale for participation extends beyond legal obligation. Participation improves decision-making by incorporating perspectives that adults alone cannot provide. Children experience public services, education systems, environmental challenges and community life in ways that differ from adults. Their lived experiences provide evidence about how policies operate in practice rather than how institutions assume they operate. As a result, participation contributes to more responsive, relevant and effective policies.

Participation also strengthens public institutions. When children are meaningfully included in policymaking processes, institutions become more accountable, legitimate and responsive. Policies developed with children rather than solely for children are more likely to reflect children's realities, needs and priorities. Participation can therefore be understood not only as a children's rights issue but as a governance issue.



Shania, a 15-year-old climate advocate from Tanzania, at COP27 in Egypt, where she called for stronger climate action and greater inclusion of children's voices in decision-making, building on the advocacy skills she developed through World Vision Ireland's SAUTI-Youth programme.

Participation and Intergenerational Governance

Climate change introduces an additional and increasingly urgent dimension to the participation agenda. Decisions taken today regarding climate adaptation, resilience, biodiversity conservation, food systems, energy transitions and environmental protection will shape children's lives long after current political mandates have expired. Yet children remain significantly under-represented within many of the institutions responsible for making those decisions.

This raises profound questions of intergenerational governance. Climate policies developed today will affect future generations far more than current adult populations. If climate governance is to be legitimate, accountable and sustainable, it must create opportunities for children and young people to contribute to decisions that will shape their futures.

Climate governance presents a unique participation challenge because the consequences of today's decisions will be experienced disproportionately by future generations. Children participating in climate governance frequently connect their engagement to concerns about the future, recognising that the decisions being made today will shape the environments, economies and societies in which they will live as adults.

In short, child participation in climate governance is more than rights compliance - it is increasingly a prerequisite for effective and intergenerationally accountable public policy.

2. What Children Tell Us About Participation

Experiences of children and young people participating in international climate governance highlight both the potential of participation and the barriers that continue to prevent participation from translating into influence.

Children and young people consistently described participation as more than attendance at meetings or events. Meaningful participation involved opportunities to express views, engage directly with decision-makers, represent communities and contribute to discussions about issues affecting their lives. Many participants described feeling respected and valued when policymakers took time to listen to their



At COP30, World Vision Ireland youth delegate Abasi joined a powerful roundtable hosted by Bread for the World alongside Green Faith and Comida di Amanha to discuss sustainable and climate-resilient school meals.



Abasi and Mwajama, youth advocates from World Vision Ireland's EU-funded ARDHI Tanga programme, shared their experiences of climate change and youth participation at a policy discussion on EU climate action ahead of Ireland's 2026 EU Presidency.

perspectives or continue conversations after formal presentations. As one young person explained, "I felt truly heard because they treated me as a serious partner, not just a token participant", recalling how decision-makers engaged with the recommendations he presented and subsequently approached him to discuss them further. These experiences reinforced the idea that children's experiences and perspectives constitute legitimate contributions to policy discussions.

The benefits of participation for a child extended beyond simple representation. Children reported increased confidence, stronger leadership skills, improved public speaking abilities and a greater understanding of governance processes. As one child explained, "It gave me confidence to speak in front of people and share ideas that I never thought adults would listen to." Participation connected children from different countries and contexts, creating new forms of solidarity and global awareness. It strengthened children's understanding of themselves not merely as beneficiaries of policy, but as active contributors to public life.

Importantly, many children understood their role as bridges of evidence between policy discussions and communities experiencing climate impacts. As one participant explained, "I wasn't speaking only for myself. I was carrying the experiences of children in my community who are living with the impacts of climate change every day." Experiences of drought, flooding, food insecurity, environmental degradation and climate vulnerability informed their contributions. Participation therefore functioned as a mechanism through which local realities could be communicated into national and international climate governance processes.

Especially when experiences of meaningful participation are linked to local climate education and action, they are strongly rooted in Positive Youth Development, which focuses on strengthening children's assets, agency and contribution, enabling them to act as agents of change in environmental sustainability and climate action.

Supported Participation and Institutional Influence

Perhaps the most significant insight emerging from children's experiences is the distinction between voice and influence.

Children frequently described positive experiences of participation where they felt listened to, respected and supported. Preparation, safeguarding, mentoring, accompaniment and capacity strengthening enabled children to participate confidently and effectively. These supports were consistently identified as essential elements of meaningful participation.

However, support alone does not guarantee influence. An important distinction exists between supported participation and institutional influence. Children often participated in consultations, dialogues and side events while remaining distant from the formal decision-making spaces where outcomes were determined.

This highlights a wider governance challenge. Meaningful participation depends not only on preparing children to engage, but also on institutions creating pathways through which children's contributions can inform decisions. Children were not simply asking for more opportunities to speak. They were asking how participation translated into action.

Meaningful participation therefore requires more than voice. It requires governance systems capable of demonstrating that children's perspectives have been heard, considered and used.

3. From International Commitments to Domestic Reality

One of the central paradoxes of children's participation is that international recognition has never been stronger while implementation remains uneven. Participation is firmly embedded within the CRC and increasingly reflected in



Thanks to Irish Aid support through World Vision Ireland's NOURISH programme, 12-year-old child advocate Lynthia from the Solomon Islands attended COP30, bringing her lived experience of climate change to global discussions. Pictured alongside Irene Marbun, Operations Manager at World Vision Solomon Islands.

A common finding across all jurisdictions is that general rights such as freedom of expression do not adequately protect children's participation. Participation is more than the ability to speak; it requires institutions to listen, consider and respond to children's views when making decisions that affect their lives.

The evidence suggests that stronger constitutional protection is associated with clearer legal obligations and greater recognition of children as rights-holders. Constitutional provisions that explicitly guarantee the right to be heard and require due consideration of children's views provide a stronger foundation for participation than reliance on general rights or ordinary legislation alone.

However, constitutional recognition is only the starting point. Legal protections must be matched by institutions, procedures and accountability mechanisms capable of translating participation into influence. Recognition matters, but governance systems ultimately determine whether children's voices help shape decisions in practice.

4. What Makes Participation Meaningful?

Meaningful participation is not achieved simply by inviting children into discussions. It requires both systems that enable children to participate effectively and institutions that are prepared to engage seriously with their views. These two dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Participation cannot be meaningful if children are unsupported, nor can it be meaningful if institutions fail to listen, respond and act.

Meaningful participation is consistent with Lundy's framework of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence¹. Children require safe and inclusive opportunities to participate, support to develop and communicate their views, decision-makers who are prepared to listen, and genuine opportunities for those views to influence outcomes. When any of these elements are absent, participation risks becoming partial, ineffective or symbolic.

1. Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927-942

Systems that Enable Children to Participate

Children consistently identified practical supports that made participation possible. Preparation, safeguarding, mentoring, translation support, logistical assistance and trusted adult accompaniment were all considered essential. Participation rarely occurs automatically once opportunities are created. It depends upon systems that support children before, during and after engagement processes.

Adult support should not be understood as limiting children's agency. Rather, adults should be seen as allies in fostering meaningful child participation. As previously described, effective support creates the conditions through which children are able to exercise agency, communicate their views and engage confidently with decision-makers. The strongest participation processes balance children's ownership of their messages and priorities with appropriate adult-led safeguarding and support.

This was reflected in the experiences of participants who emphasised the importance of being supported while retaining ownership of their message. As one young participant explained: "We were given full autonomy and a full view on what we want to present... it was our presentation. We created the whole thing. They just supported us and

made sure it looked presentable."

Meaningful children's participation begins on the community level. Parents, caregivers, teachers, faith leaders and community leaders also play an important role in enabling meaningful participation. By creating supportive learning environments and fostering positive intergenerational relationships, they help children and adolescents build the confidence, skills and opportunities needed to engage in decision-making processes. Participation is often strongest where children are supported not only by institutions but also by the families, schools and communities around them.

Meaningful participation must also be adapted according to age, experience and context. Younger children may require more intensive support and safeguarding, while older children may benefit more from mentoring, technical information and opportunities for direct engagement. Participation therefore requires flexibility rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Creating space for participation is important, but ensuring that children have the skills, confidence and support to use that space effectively is equally critical. As one young person reflected on the impact participation had on them personally: "Presenting our call to action directly to global leaders and the French minister proved that young people can command real power and drive international dialogue."

Institutional Processes that Enable Influence

Supporting children to participate is only one part of meaningful participation. Participation also depends on institutions being willing and able to engage with children's views. Opportunities to speak are insufficient if decision-makers are not prepared to listen, respond and demonstrate how children's contributions have been considered.

Accountability is therefore a critical component of meaningful participation. Children consistently emphasised the importance of understanding what happened to their views after participation processes concluded. Feedback mechanisms help demonstrate whether participation has influenced decision-making and reduced the risk of participation becoming tokenistic.

Participants repeatedly distinguished between simply being present and being taken seriously. One young person described a positive experience of engagement with decision-makers: "People listened carefully to my ideas. They paid close attention,

and their positive response made me feel that my voice was respected and valued."

Meaningful participation therefore requires institutions to move beyond consultation towards engagement. This involves establishing clear processes through which children's perspectives are considered within policy development, implementation and review. Participation becomes meaningful not simply because children are heard, but because institutions create transparent pathways showing how children's contributions have informed decisions.

Ultimately, influence is not the responsibility of children alone. Children can provide perspectives, evidence and lived experience, but institutions must create the conditions through which those contributions shape outcomes. As the research found, positive participatory experiences and institutional influence are related but distinct. Meaningful participation is therefore achieved when systems support children to engage and institutions are accountable for responding.

5. Key Barriers to Meaningful Participation

Despite growing recognition of participation rights, significant barriers remain.

Many participation opportunities continue to depend on projects, programmes or individual champions rather than permanent institutional structures. While such initiatives can be innovative and effective, they remain vulnerable to changes in funding, leadership or political priorities. Participation therefore often lacks sustainability and continuity.

Institutional barriers also persist. Many children experience participation around governance processes rather than within them. Consultations, dialogues and public forums may create opportunities for expression without providing meaningful access to the spaces where decisions are negotiated and agreed.

Practical barriers remain significant. Financial

constraints, language differences, accessibility requirements, visa restrictions, digital divides and limited access to information can all restrict children's ability to participate. These barriers are often greatest for children already experiencing marginalisation or climate vulnerability.

Representation presents an additional challenge. Participation opportunities frequently reach children who are already confident, engaged and connected to participation networks. While these contributions remain valuable, they raise important questions about whose experiences are represented and whose voices continue to be excluded.

Climate governance illustrates these challenges particularly clearly. Children increasingly participate in consultations, dialogues and international forums. Yet participation often occurs alongside climate governance processes rather than within them. Consultations may be extensive while influence remains limited.

6. Building Participation Systems for Climate Governance

A central lesson emerging from participation practice is that participation is most effective when embedded in systems rather than projects.

Many participation initiatives are innovative and well designed. However, as previously described, they often depend on temporary funding, specific programmes or committed individuals. Once projects conclude, participation opportunities can disappear. This limits continuity, accountability and influence.

The challenge therefore goes beyond creating more opportunities for participation. It lies in building governance systems capable of translating participation into influence. Effective participation systems create regular opportunities for engagement, establish responsibilities for decision-makers and provide permanent mechanisms through which children's views can inform policy and governance processes.

Community service-learning projects, direct advocacy and organising and networking can connect adolescents' local climate action and lived experiences with decision-making at local, national and international levels. Then, youth councils, children's parliaments and permanent advisory bodies demonstrate how participation can be institutionalised within governance structures. Participation is strongest where governments embed participation into public administration rather than relying on isolated initiatives.

Participation, Legitimacy and Accountability

Climate governance decisions carry implications that extend across generations. When children have opportunities to participate but no clear route to influence outcomes, participation risks becoming symbolic. By contrast, governance systems that connect participation to decision-making strengthen both accountability and legitimacy.

Children consistently emphasised the importance of understanding what happened to their views after participation processes conclude. Feedback, transparency and visible links between participation and decision-making help build trust in public institutions and demonstrate that participation is more than consultation alone.

From Supported Participation to Institutional Influence

Participation and influence are related but distinct concepts. Participation creates opportunities for expression and engagement. Influence requires governance structures that connect those contributions to decision-making processes.

Governments, public institutions and climate governance bodies should therefore move beyond creating opportunities for participation and towards establishing mechanisms that directly link participation to policy development, implementation and oversight.

These lessons are particularly relevant to climate governance. Climate adaptation planning, biodiversity strategies, resilience measures, disaster risk reduction frameworks and Action for Climate Empowerment all require long-term governance systems. Child participation should therefore be embedded within climate governance structures rather than remaining confined to conferences, consultations or public events.

Participation becomes meaningful when it becomes part of governance infrastructure.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Recognise Child Participation as a Governance Obligation

Governments should strengthen legal and policy frameworks by enshrining children's right to participation in all matters affecting them as a constitutional right. This policy change would ensure that participation is recognised not as a discretionary activity but as a fundamental responsibility of public institutions.

Recommendation 2: Build Permanent Participation Infrastructure

Governments should establish and resource permanent child participation mechanisms at local, national and sectoral levels. These structures should be linked directly to decision-making processes and integrated into public administration.

Recommendation 3: Embed Child Participation Across Climate Governance

Governments should systematically include children in the development, implementation and monitoring of Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans, biodiversity strategies, disaster risk reduction frameworks and national ACE implementation processes.

Governments should also establish formal mechanisms linking children to national climate positions before and after climate negotiations, helping bridge the gap between participation and influence.

Recommendation 4: Create Accountability and Influence Pathways

Participation processes should include formal feedback mechanisms explaining how children's contributions were considered and used. Governments should establish transparent systems linking child participation directly to decision-making processes.

Recommendation 5: Invest in Meaningful Participation

Meaningful participation requires investment in preparation, accessibility, safeguarding, facilitation, mentoring, information provision and institutional capacity. These should be understood as governance investments rather than programme costs. Sustained climate change education, hands-on learning and life skills development can strengthen adolescents' knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes for active citizenship and meaningful participation.

Recommendation 6: Prioritise Inclusion and Representation

Participation systems should actively engage children who are often excluded from decision-making, including children experiencing poverty, disability, displacement, discrimination and climate vulnerability.

CONCLUSION: FROM VOICE TO INFLUENCE

International commitments to child participation are stronger than ever. Children themselves are increasingly willing and able to contribute to decisions affecting their futures. Evidence from climate governance demonstrates that children can contribute informed perspectives, communicate lived experience and engage constructively with policymakers.

The challenge facing governments today is therefore not whether children are capable of participating, but whether institutions are prepared to create the conditions through which participation can influence decisions.

Meaningful child participation requires both supported participation and institutional influence. Legal recognition must be accompanied by institutional mechanisms. Participation opportunities must be supported by accountability systems. Consultation must be connected to decision-making.

Climate change makes this challenge particularly urgent. Those who will live longest with the consequences of climate decisions should have meaningful opportunities to influence them. Child participation is therefore not only a matter of rights. It is a requirement for effective, legitimate and intergenerationally accountable governance.

The next phase of the participation agenda must move beyond increasing opportunities for children to speak. It should emphasize building governance systems capable of ensuring that children's voices help shape the decisions that will determine their futures.



At COP28, World Vision child delegate Taissa presented Micheál Martin, then Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, with a necklace made from pirarucu fish scales, highlighting the impact of severe drought and rising water temperatures on the Amazon River and the communities that depend on it.