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# Children's participation in international fora: The experiences and perspectives of children and adults

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## Abstract

Children and young people are increasingly participating in events organised by international organisations. In spite of a growing body of research on children's participation in decision-making, little is known about their experiences and the perceptions of adults who attend. This article compares the experiences of 16 children and 12 adults who participated in high-level global events. Three themes were identified, Representation, Capacity and Impact. Findings suggest that while children and adults identified similar opportunities and challenges for meaningful participation, children's perceptions of their engagement differed from adults' in that they were more likely to be positive about the value of their contribution.

## KEYWORDS

children and young people's participation, intergenerational dialogue, international events

## INTRODUCTION

Children and young people are increasingly taking part in international events and meetings. The impetus for this is a growing awareness of their entitlement to be heard in all matters affecting them, including being heard on international policy generated by bodies such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU) and Council of Europe (CoE). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has welcomed the contributions of NGOs in this regard; it 'encourages them to further promote child participation in all matters affecting them, including at the grass-roots, community, and national or international levels', and to facilitate exchanges of best practices (United Nations, 2009 para. 10).

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Since the 1990s, mainly due to changes to legislation and good practice guidelines, many child participation structures, such as Children's Parliaments and Youth Councils, have been established. A recent study by Janta et al. (2021) found more than 300 such mechanisms exist that enable children and young people to express their views and have them taken into account in decision-making at local, national and EU levels. While activities and levels of children and young people's involvement vary between countries, the authors found that these structures typically focus on consultation and fact-finding initiatives. Few provide evidence of the impact or influence of children and young people's views on policy and decision-making processes.

This article explores the experiences of both the children and young people and adult decision-makers who met at international fora as a result of a programme ('Young Leaders') developed by World Vision, a global NGO (World Vision, 2017). The study represented here is the first to explore whether child participation differs when children and young people are taken outside their national context to engage with global decision-makers and, if so, how it differs. It is also the first study to capture the experiences of both the children and young people and adults attending the same events. This becomes highly relevant as more opportunities for children and young people to engage in policy forums have been observed globally; thus, mechanisms and standards need to be in place to ensure that their engagement is ethical, meaningful and resourced, in order to fulfil the obligation that that adult decision-makers engage with children and young people directly.

The article begins with a description of the Young Leaders programme and the methods adopted in the study. The findings are explored under three key themes: representation, capacity and impact. What emerges is a rich picture of the value of children's participation, and distinctive challenges, and recommendations for making the experience more effective going forward. The article concludes by reflecting on the fact that adults and children and young people often had different perceptions of the value and limitations of these events and the implications this has for organising such events in the future.

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

For centuries, children and young people have engaged in multiple activities in society, from supporting the family economy to attending school or engaging in entertainment activities. Still, their roles have been often subordinated to adults' power, and their participation in decision-making has been restricted by cultural and social contexts (Corsaro, 2011; Cuevas-Parra, 2022; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2021). In 1989, the UNCRC explicitly established a set of participatory rights for children and elevated these rights to the position of a central principle (Verhellen, 2015). Article 12(1) of the UNCRC includes two pivotal rights: the right to express a view and the right to have that view given due weight. Article 12 sets out children and young people's right to express their perspectives and experiences to influence decision-making, while communicating these views in a variety of ways that consider the child's age and maturity (Lundy, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2011; Tisdall, 2015). Article 12 should be read in conjunction with the rights of freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), freedom of association and peaceful assembly (Article 15), access to information (Article 17), respect for human rights in a free society (Article 29) and right to participate fully in cultural and artistic life (Article 31).

Conceptualising Article 12, Lundy (2007) proposes a model for children and young people's participation that has four interrelated elements: 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence'. In this model, 'space' refers to giving children and young people the opportunity to express a view, 'voice' means that they must be facilitated to express their views, 'audience' reflects the obligation to listen to their

views, and ‘influence’ means that these views must be acted upon, as appropriate (Lundy, 2007: 933). However, despite the major advance brought by Article 12, children and young people continue to face limited opportunities to express views and influence public decision-making (Forde et al., 2017). Adults and organisations remain the guardians of this right, ultimately weighing and judging the abilities of children and young people to participate based on their age, maturity or perceived best interests (Archard, 2004; Lundy, 2018; Ruggiero, 2022).

Organisations such as the EU, Eurochild, UNICEF and Save the Children have explored child participation in the context of policy-making locally and internationally (e.g. Crowley et al., 2021; Crowley & Larkins, 2018; Day et al., 2015; Feinstein, 2008; Lansdown, 2011; UNICEF, 2018). These reviews have focused on child participation strategies and methods, described examples of good practice by highlighting successes, benefits and challenges, and developed many toolkits, guides and recommendations on meaningful and ethical child participation from lessons learned. However, as Bennett-Woodhouse (2003) concluded in her reflections on child participation after the UN Special Session in May 2002, it may be adults' attitudes that pose the most significant barrier to children's participation, particularly on the international stage. While there is a growing body of evidence on the experiences of child participation in local and national events since Bennett-Woodhouse statement in 2003 (e.g. Forde et al., 2017; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020), taking children seriously, creating spaces and opportunities for their meaningful participation, and treating them as bone fide equals at high-level events, is still very much underdeveloped. There is a dearth of information about children and young people's experiences in international meetings, and less still exploring the reactions and perceptions of the adults whom they encounter at these events.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Young Leaders project is a network-based platform developed by World Vision International, involving dynamic learning and the collaboration of young leaders, aged 10–17 years. More than 600 children and young people from 22 countries are part of this initiative which is a key component of the World Vision Child Participation Framework. This project aims to empower young leaders, providing spaces and opportunities for them to engage in global policy debate to foster social change. In order to achieve this goal, the young leaders are equipped with the tools, skills and knowledge needed to actively participate in advocacy initiatives. With the acquired tools and skills, the young leaders mobilise themselves through a global network of young advocates, making their voices heard in policy debate at local, national and global levels. Between 2017 and 2020, young leaders engaged in global policy events, including the Pan-African Forum to end violence against children (Addis Ababa, 2017), European Development Days (Brussels, 2017, 2018, 2019), UNCRC anniversary (Geneva, 2017, 2018, 2019), European Girls Week (Brussels, 2017), Peace and Security Youth Forum (Brussels, 2017, 2018), UN EVAC Solutions Summit (Stockholm, 2018), Commonwealth Youth Forum (London, 2018), UNCRC Day of General Discussion (Geneva, 2018), UN High Level Political Forum (New York, 2019) and UN Global status report on preventing violence against children (Geneva, 2020).

## METHODS

The research engaged with children and young people participating in the Young Leaders project who had a wealth of experience in their roles as young leaders, and worked on various child rights issues

in their communities and at national and international levels. In total, 28 participants consented to take part in the study. They were a purposeful sample of 12 high-level global stakeholders (4 male and 8 female) and 16 young leaders (children and young people; 5 Male; 11 Female; aged 14–18). Participants were recruited during or after their attendance at high-level political events in New York, Geneva and Brussels (2019).

Ethical approval was gained from Queen's University Belfast, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work to explore child participation at high-level political events that happen on the global stage. All participants were over 16 years and so could consent to take part in the study, all consented to be audio-recorded, and confidentiality agreements were required for additional adults who would access to the raw data, for example translators. All adult participants had a one-to-one interview which focused on their experiences with young leaders in general and specific experiences they had at global events, for example *what was good/not so good about their involvement?* And, *do you think what they said influenced the result?* The young leaders spoke with researchers either on a one-to-one basis or as part of a group interview with other child participants with whom they shared a panel. They were asked about their experiences in the Young Leaders Project, for example *How (and why) did you get involved? What do you think about the kinds of activities you do there? What do you like about them? Is there anything you would want to change about them?*, and their specific participation experiences at global events, for example *how did you get ready or prepare for that?*, *what did you think about that environment?*, *did you feel comfortable sharing your views there?* Interviews were conducted in English. However, since some of the child participants did not speak English, an accompanying adult provided two-way translation.

The analysis was conducted during the lockdown period of the COVID pandemic (2020–2021). Transcripts of the interviews were forwarded securely to the authors, who each conducted an independent thematic analysis and met several times online to identify codes and categories and discuss and agree the themes that they had identified in their reading of the data. This was an inductive and iterative process and, when the authors discussed together their interpretation of the data, new codes and categories were highlighted. Each author identified a coding cluster that they were particularly interested in and returned to the data to interrogate it further. As a result, three key themes were identified in the analysis: Representation, Capacity and Impact.

Excerpts of actual quotes from the participants are used throughout this article and the sources of these quotes are identified in the following way: adult quotes use the code *ID.Sex-Role*; for example, *7.F-Human Rights Specialist large global NGO*, means that the seventh adult participant in the study was a female human rights specialist from a large global NGO. The children and young people's quotes are identified by a similar code, *ID.Sex-Age-Country*; for example, *11.F16-Romania* means that the 11th child participant was a 16-year-old female from Romania. Please see Table 1 for these details as they relate to all the participants.

## REPRESENTATION

One of the key findings that emerged from this study is the issue of representation of children and young people as child representatives. This issue raises important questions, including who are the children and young people that attend global forums, how are they identified or manage to be invited and whom do they actually represent? While representation is often discussed in reference to political representation within democratic systems, childhood scholars have explored representation through a number of different practices, ranging from consultations with children and young people to children's parliaments and child activism (e.g. Holzscheiter et al., 2019; Percy-Smith, 2011; Wall & Dar, 2011).

**TABLE 1** Participants

<b>GLOBAL STAKEHOLDERS (ID.Sex-Role)</b>	
1.	M-Senior Social Development Specialist
2.	M-Cabinet Minister, Greece
3.	F-Member of European Parliament, England
4.	M-EU Special Representative for Human Rights
5.	F-House of Lords UK, Council of Europe
6.	F-UNCRC Member
7.	F-Human Rights Specialist large global NGO
8.	F-UN Special Representative
9.	F-Member of European Parliament, England
10.	M-Director of a Global Initiative
11.	F-UNCRC Secretariat
12.	F- Diplomatic service of the European Union
<b>YOUNG LEADERS (ID.Sex/Age-Country)</b>	
1.	M-16-Ghana
2.	F-16-Ghana
3.	F-16-Ghana
4.	F-15-Brazil
5.	F-16-Romania
6.	F-14-Mongolia
7.	F-14-Indonesia
8.	F-17-Lesotho
9.	F-16-Sri Lanka
10.	M-15-Sri Lanka
11.	F-16-Romania
12.	M-14-Albania
13.	M-14-Indonesia
14.	M-15-Brazil
15.	F-15-Bangladesh
16.	F-18-Bangladesh

In the context of this study, representation is understood beyond simply standing on behalf of another person, with consideration given to how the act of representation is constructed by the children and young people who represent others, referred to as the represented, and whether this representation is considered legitimate.

This study found that understandings of representation varied, with adult and child participants holding different views about how representatives are selected, what they should do on behalf of those represented and the extent to which they genuinely represent the views or standpoints of those they represent (for further discussion see Mansbridge, 2011; Saward, 2009; Urbinati & Warren, 2018). When the participating young people were asked how and why they got involved in global events, most of them perceived they got engaged to represent children's voices, and this representation to be a form of bridging between those who are represented and the global stakeholders that the child

representatives addressed during their interventions on the global stage. One young leader from Sri Lanka exemplified this understanding by explaining that she attended a Global Summit in Sweden to represent the voices of many children, not only her own personal views:

I and another child from Tanzania participated in the panel discussion and represented all children; representing the kind of the people who are participating from all over the world and to get an idea about the issues that we face and the solutions that we have kind of arrived at.

(9.F16-Sri Lanka)

Children and young people consequently considered representation to be a form of empowerment in which they acted on behalf of other children and young people, representing the latter's views from the standpoint of being children and young people themselves (for similar findings see also Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2020). In fact, children and young people who participated in the study considered their own experiences to be an essential component of their representation role. What made their engagement in the global debate different from other types of participation was the fact that their stories were told in the first person, having been personally experienced by the representatives and their peers, making their representation valid. One young leader from Brazil who participated in a European event noted:

It was a fantastic experience...because I could feel that the people who were listening to my speech were really interested in that issue and they could really feel the intensity of my speech and how important that thing was for me.

(4.F15-Brazil)

This finding, that was evident in the narratives of all the children and young people who participated in the study, has been widely discussed within childhood studies and relates to the concept of children and young people as experts on their own lives, a concept coined by Langsted (1994) and used extensively by scholars. Children and young people's recognition of themselves as experts on their own lives, together with their capacity to shape and reshape their environments, is critical for ensuring that they represent others effectively.

In contrast, among the adults, concerns were raised about the extent to which child representatives truly represent their peers, with representativeness being depicted as a potentially contested and complex term. This more negative assessment of child representation raises questions about the extent to which representation should be considered a meaningful form of child participation. Some adult participants considered that children and young people are often unable to engage in intergenerational exchanges of ideas at anything more than a tokenistic level when their level of representation, or legitimacy as representatives, is unclear. One adult reflected:

They're not representative of a parliament or a network or a youth group or whatever else...they are probably part of an elite sub-set of children in the country that they are coming and therefore not truly representative.

(10.M-Director of a Global Initiative)

Hence, the question that requires answering is the extent to which representation allows children and young people to enter into a dialogue that is transparent and transcends the common barriers that

children and young people face while interacting in international events, which are considered a more adult domain.

When considering the issue of ‘representativeness’ further, one adult noted:

I think the problem of representativeness of these children [is that] I don't know on the behalf of whom they are speaking. Who really decides that they are representative of all children? For me, this is not normal and we need to be very careful of that. Another point [is] why [do] we decide that they are leaders. I have no idea. Because, maybe, we need to have [a] kind of criteria to make sure.

(6.F-UNCRC Member)

This concern is valid, and indeed there is always the possibility of poor procedures in place to select child delegates. However, a review of the core documents of the World Vision's Young Leaders project found that participating children and young people ‘represent diversity and a variety of identities, such as gender, ethnicity, social class, faith, different abilities and live in both rural and urban areas’ (World Vision, 2017: 2). Furthermore, one of the requirements to attend global events is to be part of a children and young people's group or organisation, in addition to being selected by their peers to represent their own local constituencies. These attributes related to representation are rooted in the structure of the Young Leaders project, which aims to empower and build the capacity of children and young people to act on behalf of their peers and represent them in dialogue with stakeholders, policy experts and decision-makers to promote social change in their communities, countries and regions (World Vision, 2017).

From interviews with adult stakeholders, it was noticeable that part of the problem with the way in which the legitimacy of child representation is measured is that comparisons are based on adult representative structures for participation. These tend to differ from the opportunities open to children and young people. For instance, the demand for valid representation on the international stage is not required of adult stakeholders, but it is often a criticism of child representation. Reflecting on this, one adult commented:

We need to make sure that this child is not just giving their experience. Like they need to represent other children and how can that happen, which is also frustrating, because it is not the case that they [insist on representativeness] for adults...adults are likely to speak regardless.

(7.F-Human Rights Specialist large global NGO)

The data collected in this study evidences the importance of ensuring that global decision-makers accept children and young people as valid and relevant representatives of other children (and their own experiences). This requires a shift towards engaging with children and young people in a different way, respecting them as competent social actors and challenging the way in which they are currently treated differently to adults who engage in representation (for similar findings see also Cuevas-Parra, 2022; Spyrou, 2018; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2020).

## CAPACITY

A core theme in the data was that of capacity in relation to, the personal capacity (competency, knowledge and skills) of the children and young people to get involved in international fora, and, the practical capacity of organisations to enable and accommodate the children and young people's participation (organisational systems/culture). While none of the adult participants questioned the value of children and young people's participation generally, many spoke at length about the underpinning reasons and need for it. A few did, however, question the added value of children and young people's participation, particularly in the international context. Furthermore, in relation to meaningful engagement, some adults expressed a concern that the children and young people did not always reach the right audience and were, in effect, 'preaching to the converted'.

I think all people there were open, and I think they were selected to be, I think. I don't think the panel was necessarily representative of policy makers or the whole of the population of them.

(4.M-EU Special Representative for Human Rights)

Children and young people's appearance on the international stage was considered a waste of time by some adults who thought the children's contribution might be more relevant at a local community level.

I always wonder how meaningful it is, in the sense that to me child participation is key but it should first happen at the community level, where children can really make a change.

(7.F-Human Rights Specialist large global NGO)

These adults assumed that children might be able to make more of a difference in their own lives and that of their families and communities, rather than at a global level.

The extent of the children and young people's experience and knowledge of the issues under discussion was also queried by some adults, who assumed that the children were well educated and chosen to speak at such events because they were confident and could articulate their messages well.

There's some evidence behind it that because the kids who come from, let's say, a particular sub-Saharan Africa country and are very fluent in, you know, the details and the nuances of the English language, [they] have properly had a slightly different education.

(10.M-Director of a Global Initiative)

If the children and young people were unable to answer questions or engage in further debate about the issues off-script, some adults felt that their messages were forced and suspected that they might have been put in place to forward a particular political agenda, which reduced their credibility and legitimacy.

They may believe in what they're saying, but someone's written that for them. Either that...it's that clumsy bureaucratic phrase, or it's just too adult...So that's a 'watch out'.

(10.M-Director of a Global Initiative)

Ultimately, the children and young people's authority to be there was judged on their ability to convince these adults of their experience and knowledge, sometimes in a 10-minute speech.

She was the most eloquent, passionate, inspirational young person I think I [have] probably ever seen and the fact that she was also, you know, at the disadvantages of gender inequality, of being a young girl; she was blind...It was clearly with her voice... She knew exactly what she was asking for from that audience and they had it in their gift to deliver it if they so choose to. You know, it was like an impossible ask. It was very clear, very compelling, very inspirational. And people were just silent...she had a gravitas actually...an incredible mix of charm and gravitas, and just a very, very compelling speaker.

(10.M-Director of a Global Initiative)

Children and young people's credibility appeared to be secured if they exhibited an authentic voice and articulated their story emotively (see also Perry-Hazan, 2016).

Apart from children and young people's ability to speak at international events, some of the adults expressed concerns about safeguarding and the complexities of working ethically with children and young people at international for a (see also Crowley et al., 2021; Crowley & Larkins, 2018; Feinstein, 2008). This included dealing with a child who might become upset or one that was unable to speak due to being nervous.

How we ensure that [there is] an accompanying adult; what happens if any...we don't want any situation; we are too scared of any situation where the child feels uncomfortable and we don't how to respond or react.

(6.F-UNCRC Member)

Safeguarding was related to the age of children and the best interest principle. While adults in general did not object to younger children (below age 10) attending, they had concerns about their competence and queried whether it was in their best interests to attend.

Most of the time we are talking about adolescents...Otherwise, they would need to be accompanied, and, perhaps, the language skills might still not be sufficient for addressing this kind of events, if we are talking about a child who is 7, 8, 10 years old.

(2.M-Cabinet Minister)

Drawing attention to the organisational features at events, some adults described how children must 'fit-in' to the existing formal structures.

Some would try to promote child participation automatically, in all fora all the time (dot, dot, dot), when, maybe, sometimes, it makes more sense than others...The UN meetings, they are so formatted. There is no flexibility as to the length of the speech and the format of the speech, and, you know, that is also very difficult to...try to make a child fit into

that because the child has no creativity, there is no room for creativity on how to convey your message.

(7.F-Human Rights Specialist large global NGO)

International fora were therefore depicted as adult-centric structures with organisational cultures of power, control and discrimination, which could easily dismiss children and young people. Spaces where children's abilities were underestimated and unappreciated, and one in which they did not naturally belong. Against this backdrop, some adults thought that the best way to include children and young people's views, just like those of other adults, could be through video conferencing or in reports. As such, they felt that children and young people did not necessarily have to be there in person to get their messages and views across.

They speak to a few members, some of them watching their watches, only half listening and doing it because it looks good to be doing it. Even us, we wonder is it still useful to fly our staff from country offices to speak to the committee. Yeah. We are convinced that it is very useful to provide them with information in a report, that is super useful because they base their recommendations on it. So, we have no doubts. But we are not sure it is really useful for us to actually come, travel, take a few days out of work. Again, pollute the world and to come here to speak to them. We can as well do that through video conference.

(7.F-Human Rights Specialist large global NGO)

However, while some adults viewed bringing children and young people along for a one-day appearance as counterproductive, they also had ideas on how to make the organisational culture more child-friendly so that children and young people's capacities and engagement could be maximised. Some adults felt that there was a need to develop guidance for the children that would communicate the organisational methods and processes to them, as well as accessing children and young people's evaluations of events to examine the structures and implementation issues.

[we need] assessment themselves by children who participate to understand what was going on, if we want to improve what would we do?...To make sure that children are seen as actors, not instrumentalised for various purposes. If we need them to continue to trust adults, to trust institutions... we need to be very credible.

(8.F-UN Special Representative)

In contrast, the children and young people participating in the study did not question the adults' credibility, public speaking performance or lack of personal experience of the issues, and were in no doubt about their own credentials and legitimacy for participating in high-level events. The majority saw themselves as human rights defenders, standing up for not just their own rights but also for the rights of others, which instilled in them a sense of achievement and pride.

It's a really unique feeling, because I'm helping the children around me: my friends, my colleagues, and actually all the children around all the entire world...I want to help as

much as possible and want to help other people too...and I am so proud that I am part of this community.

(11.F16-Romania)

The children and young people viewed the adults as international allies, influential authorities who were in a position to help them be included in international debate. They regarded the international stage as a safe place where they could share their hopes and ideas for resolutions. However, one young person was aware that some adults were judging the children and young people who participated in internal fora, which she found unsettling.

I am confident that my speech is great and all that. But when it is so many people and too many eyes on me, I easily get nervous and I have a mind-set that they are judging me and I don't like that.

(6.F14-Mongolia)

Contrary to the safeguarding concerns expressed by adults, and even though the children and young people were nervous to speak at international events, they all felt entitled and confident to be there and enjoyed their moment, *Half nervous, half fine. I am actually a public speaker in my community. It is my hobby.* (8.F17-Lesotho). Many of the child participants experienced adult resistance in their local contexts and valued the opportunity to be at international events where they assumed people understood the issues they were campaigning on and valued their opinions. As one young person observed when she reflected on the contrast between speaking at home in Ghana and in international events:

Like you go to somebody right now talking about violence, I would have to explain the meaning of violence, what violence is, examples of violence and things. But outside there, there is no need because all of them understand.

(2.F16-Ghana)

The children and young people felt comfortable and relished their participation in international fora, finding affinity with their adult counterparts. For the majority, rather than being sceptical of the adults' abilities to listen and deliver on these, the children and young people were hopeful that their views and presence might inspire the adults to action.

As other studies have demonstrated (e.g. Crowley et al., 2021; Feinstein, 2008), both the adults and the children and young people were aware of practical issues that inhibit the capacity of children and young people to become involved in international events, such as lack of finances, travel issues and language barriers. While the children and young people in this study had their travel costs sponsored by World Vision, they were disappointed that not more children and young people were in attendance at the events.

I think more children should have been here; more than adults, because the violence in the world happens most[ly] to us not adults. So, we should have had a lot of children from different countries, different communities all around the world so that they can speak

about their rights and voice out the problems they are facing in their different communities. I was really sad when I saw that we had more adults than children.

(3.F16-Ghana)

International fora represented a once in a lifetime experience, and they wished that more children and young people could be involved in such events. Practical and financial supports from World Vision enabled the children and young people's capacity to participate. They spent time building their capacity to engage in the events by holding preparation workshops to develop their confidence and public speaking skills, and to prepare them for the formal environment of international fora. The organisation worked with them over time and provided them with opportunities to build their skills as 'change makers', from engaging at a local and national levels in preparation for moving up to the international arena.

I learned how to deliver my argument and aspirations, deliver my recommendations to high-level politicians. I gained more confidence. I talked at the village level with the government of the village, but when I come to New York, we talk with the people from other countries in high-level position. I feel more comfortable and confident. I think that they made me feel really, really confident and that everybody is going to listen to me.

(13.M14-Indonesia)

As part of their capacity building, the children and young people were provided other supports such as being made aware of the adult panellist credentials and who audience members were likely to be. Qualified chaperones were assigned to each child to address safeguarding issues, and interpreters to shadow the children wherever they went. They were also prepared for practical considerations, such as different weather conditions and foods.

Since I first arrived in the country, I have all the support I needed. And I felt safe...I took part in several preparation workshops...that prepared us for the roundtable that I will take part [in] to talk about my experience.

(14.M15-Brazil)

The children and young people's confidence grew from the ongoing support they received from their supporting organisation. However, despite receiving support with interpretation and translation, both the children and young people, and adults, acknowledged issues with language and translation, which could impact on children and young people's ability to deliver their messages effectively, especially as timings for speeches were tight and interpretation takes even extra time.

Even when they are not speaking English, they have their translator, and you know the impact of the speech is not the same. Because they have to speak three sentences and after the translation, and after... you have not the interaction.

(8.F-UN Special Representative)

Apart from translation processes slowing down proceedings, the children and young people worried that translators did not convey their messages with the same tenacity and emotive authority as they did when speaking in their own language.

I hope that the translation was good enough for them to really understand what I was saying for them to...for the translation to share what I was feeling. I hope the translation could show all the needs that my speech wanted to share.

(14.M15-Brazil)

In effect, they feared that their authentic voice may be lost during translation (James, 2007). Motivated by the issues they faced when working in their own language, children described an urgency to develop their own capacity to speak English, which they described as a 'global language' (4.F15-Brazil), and related this to their education.

She is, kind of, going to complete her education by this year, and having completed her education, she wanted to learn English language because she has seen the need, and she has begun to love the English language and she tells that one day, she will talk with you in English.

(Translator on behalf of 9:F16-Sri Lanka)

Even though language was a barrier, the adults and children and young people were quick to offer solutions that could enhance the experience. They both thought that organisers of international meetings could prioritise translation services, but the adults were more likely to acknowledge the difficulties related to cost and budgeting for these.

I think that the fact that I don't speak English, can err...be a limitation but it's nothing that we cannot solve with the help of technology, because they help us communicate.

(14.M15-Brazil)

We need to make sure we have funding for interpretation and actually at the UN it can be very expensive...and if there is an interpreter there and a particular language, then they could use the booth used by the UN interpreters. There are ways to explore but I think it just takes time and it takes the effort and the commitment to make sure that's priority.

(11.F-UNCRC Secretariat)

This study confirms that the international stage is a challenging arena to implement children and young people's meaningful participation. A conducive environment is difficult to establish, especially when both sets of stakeholders have differing ideas regarding the value of what children and young people bring to proceedings. When attending international meetings, the children and young people acted as invited guests and lacked any influence over planning the meeting and its agenda. This made it difficult for them to take full advantage of the opportunity and the adults were much more likely to offer alternative ways for children and young people to participate rather than appearing in person.

## IMPACT

Children's entitlement to be heard wherever decisions are made, including in international events, is not dependent on the value it is purported to have for children and young people. Their entitlement

should also not be dependent on the perceived value that their participation will have on decisions that are taken internationally or in their national contexts. The right exists because of the fact that children and young people often lack power, including political power, in the decisions that affect them. Their right to participation should therefore not have to be justified, for example through proof of its outcomes (Lundy, 2018). That said, when children and young people's participation is discussed in any context, attention often focuses on its impact. In this study, discussion about the impact of children and young people's participation in international fora covered impact on the children and young people, impact on the adults and impact on the issues that concern them.

Children and young people who take part in public decision-making activities often report a range of personal benefits, especially a growth in confidence and the opportunity to make new friends (Lundy, 2018). The same held true for participants in the international fora. However, many reported additional personal benefits gained from the travel and the international experience. This ranged from first experiences with snow (in Geneva) to trying new foods. Some of the adults questioned the personal impact on children and young people, particularly the fact that children could be missing school: *...who is probably missing school, by the way. And probably has lots of expectations, and then is talking to half empty room* (7.F-Human Rights Specialist large global NGO). Yet, none of the children and young people expressed similar concerns. Rather they identified an array of benefits for them personally and for their child rights activism.

The most commonly identified benefit was the trans-national friendships: *my favourite part is that I feel like we are a family, to be honest, because I've met in Geneva F and P, and we just bonded immediately* (11.F16-Romania). A distinctive feature of this was that some of the young people felt isolated in their own communities, with some ridiculed by peers. Participation in international fora therefore allowed them to connect with others to reinforce their identity and sense of purpose. One young person suggested that *if you create a global platform for children where they can share their activities or they can form a community, as in like we have a community and there is a secretariat playing the role to prove the worth* (15.F15-Bangladesh).

A second benefit identified by children was access to a range of new knowledge and skills, including, for example information and strategies for their activities that they could take back home and put into practice. This included enhanced understanding of international human rights law by seeing human rights in action. One young person gave the following account of her experience in Geneva,

And then another thing is that I have got from Geneva is, women can do anything. I've like...women and girls, we were talking about gender equality or something like that, but if you're want to establish...women in parliament, then we should follow the Geneva rules...I shared all of the experience to my child forum leaders and they just say like yeah um in Bangladesh, we have to mend too many kinds of rules. It's like we are staying in the girls' school, girls can't go...girls can't go out for work, they can't go for their study or something like that. But from Geneva, I have learnt that, yeah, every girl has rights, so they can move...so that's the most interesting experience for me.

(15.F15-Bangladesh)

The majority of the child participants were also convinced that their presence and participation had an actual impact and that this was connected to the international nature of the event and its attendees. For some, it seemed that they were taken more seriously by being there. Moreover, many identified the wider potential of having a global platform.

Yes, I just hope that my government, everyone else's government, every country's government after viewing my speech will think and like will think again of what they are doing and what they will do, and this will make a difference.

(8.F17-Lesotho)

Nonetheless, they were aware that they lacked political power to actually change policy.

I'm just not sure if my speech will make any difference if I was to learn anything from it...I'm not saying like make a difference right now. I said making a difference in the future...near future.

(6.F-14-Mongolia)

However, as highlighted by this young person, they hoped they might be able to influence policy, even a little, and thus viewed themselves as change-makers, *I cannot be a change....but I become a change maker now* (16.F-18-Bangladesh). Despite this, some adults saw children and young people's aspirations as demanding and pointless.

Children speak or make demands etc. And in a very informal way, I'd turn to the person next to me and I've heard people say, 'well that's great but it's completely unrealistic'. These kids are making all kinds of...a whole bunch of completely unrealistic demands of the adults and leaving, so what's the point of the session.

(10.M-Director of a Global Initiative)

This illustrates the need for adults to take children's views seriously, engage better with them and provide feedback on the possibilities, to help translate their ideas into concrete policy recommendations.

For the most part, the children and young people interviewed for this study said that they received positive feedback on their contributions during formal sessions and explained this was because audiences were well informed and interested to engage with them about the issues. Nevertheless, some also noticed that outside the formal setting, meaningful engagement dropped and they were easily dismissed (also noted by Perry-Hazan, 2016), for example when they were hosting a stall at a side event.

Some, if you approach them, they will be like they are in a hurry going somewhere. Yes, we felt bad. It's like they didn't want to talk to us. We think because we were children... Some, when I asked them, they told me they will see me later but they never came.

(1.M16-Ghana)

The children and young people who experienced this were disappointed to find some adults uninterested or engaging with them only when necessary (see also Day et al., 2015; Janta et al., 2021; Lundy, 2018).

We (official from home country) will talk to each other and just for the image (photograph) for the people to see and believe that he is doing something. And in reality they

say 'yes, yes, of course we are listening' or their assistants will listen for them. It is a bit annoying, to be honest, and it's a bit disappointing.

(11.F16-Romania)

Children and young people were therefore acutely aware that despite their expertise and competency their participation was sometimes used by some adults to bolster their public image. Several children and young people also reported that they had an emotional impact on some audience members, often seeing people crying during their presentations. For them, this was impact as they felt that these adults from other countries would now understand the issues affecting them and take that learning into their own work.

So, when I started my speech in UN. So, people are looking at me and when I start to do my speech and I try to speak it, many eyes, I saw that many people also crying. So that is the most heart-touching part for me. And when I finished my program, people called me, they are saying that you are doing very excellent work, and never try to give up on this. So, yeah, when I heard this kind of comments and this kind of things, then I thought that maybe I have succeeded.

(15.F15-Bangladesh)

The impact of children and young people's participation in international events is perceived and experienced differently by adult and child participants. While some adults were sceptical about the overall value and effect of children and young people taking part, children were unanimous in their perception that it had positive impacts for them personally, for their activity at a national level and for the issues for which they are advocating. Children in international events place just as much value on face to face connections with decision-makers as they do when they encounter them more locally (Marshall et al., 2015). The dissonance is interesting, given that all of the adult stakeholders are strong proponents of child participation in other contexts, and merits further exploration.

## CONCLUSION

Children's participation in international fora, while on the increase, remains rare. Moreover, little is understood about how it is organised and experienced in practice as well as its perceived value. This study is the first to capture the experiences and perspectives of children and young people who have attended and spoken at high-profile international events alongside the adults with whom they have engaged. What emerges from this study is a uniform commitment to the idea that children and young people are entitled to be heard in these international events but differing perspectives as to the value and impact of this activity. The children and young people who took part all valued the opportunity to make friends, learn new skills and gain confidence. They also appreciated the global platform for their cause and are convinced that hearing directly from children and young people about what is happening in their local context has an intellectual and emotional impact on the adults who are there and with whom they engage. Adults echoed much of the impact suggested by the children and young people but not all were convinced of the 'added value' of child participation in these contexts. Instead, they queried whether children and young people were able to be involved meaningfully, suggesting that their time might be better spent at home, and argued that some of the forms of participation were tokenistic. Both agreed that the children and young people had little impact on policy and the

adults commented that their words and aspirations did not easily translate into policy. However, the children and young people saw their role as inspiring adults to action in the hope that resolutions could be enacted sooner rather than later.

A further common challenge was the assumption among some adults that the children and young people who attended international fora were well-educated and privileged, based on their evident skills and abilities to convey their messages. Yet, our findings showed that all the children and young people were from marginalised populations living under the poverty line. This assumption therefore undermines the children and young people's marginal voices by attributing to them an elite status which fails to recognise that their abilities have developed despite them being from grassroots, marginalised communities. A number of the adults suggested that the role of children and young people should be solely at the community level rather than on the international stage. From a children's rights perspective, this constitutes another form of discrimination, in which children and young people are restricted in their interaction with others, and their voices and audiences are limited based on traditional mindsets that confine them to domestic localities. However, the children and young people who participated in this study oppose this view. Instead, they see themselves as change makers, active social actors and children's human rights defenders (CHRDs), standing not just for their own rights but also for the rights of others. This connects to the pivotal issue of representation, where children and young people may represent other children's and young people's voices throughout their advocacy work. They consequently position themselves as a bridge between children and young people and the global stakeholders they engage with on the international stage. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of child representation remains contested, with the views of children and young people differing from those of some key adults.

Both sets of participants identified organisational challenges, the culture of international high-level political events and the current processes of engagement, as barriers to child participation. Practical issues that may inhibit children and young people's involvement, such as lack of finances, travel issues, language barriers and skills building, required additional adult support. Children and young people were aware of these challenges but attributed some barriers to the organisation of the events, which did not always enable them to be involved meaningfully. It was their view that event organisers should work collaboratively with children and young people and their supporting organisations to plan events. Some suggestions from the adults to ensure events were as child-friendly as possible included, developing child-friendly guidelines to explain the processes and how children and young people will be involved. Other suggestions included using screens and video messaging to make events accessible to as many children and young people as possible, and evaluating their meeting methods and processes with the aim of improving these based on children and young people's experiences. Evaluation tools and continuity of engagement were therefore perceived to be a useful way to assess how well the participation processes work at international fora and to inform progress from the children and young people's perspectives. This was also deemed a way to assess the adults' capacity to cater for the children. Rather than spending time with spoken translation, written live transcripts on screens could be an effective way for people to follow the sessions in their own language, while experiencing the emotion and passion of relevant moments. Recording meetings and uploading them to an accessible online space and having children and young people send in video messages and/or reports, rather than appearing in person, was viewed as another way to include and disseminate children's messages more widely. While well intentioned, these adjustments may not be accessible for all children and young people since they require access to specific equipment and internet, as well as a certain level of literacy.

It is evident that high-level international fora are adult-centric structures and even when events are organised to include children and young people, who are entitled and competent to be there, the

formality and lack of child-friendly provisions inhibits their meaningful engagement. Much change and flexibility are required not least to emphasise children and young people's role and the added value they bring to the proceedings. As suggested by the adults in this study, providing guidance to children and young people on the organisation of events is crucial for their participation; likewise, adults could benefit from guidance on how to interact with children and young people at events, including, for example how to listen to their views, take them seriously and include these in their work, rather than dismiss the value their participation brings because it does not fit a settled understanding of how these events should work.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. For clarification, Patricio Cuevas-Parra is employed by World Vision International. All co-authors have seen and agree the contents of the manuscript, and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors elect to not share data from this research further due to ethical, privacy or confidentiality matters. All co-authors confirm they have had full access to all data in the study, and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

## ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

This research received ethics approval from the Ethics Review Committee at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast (REF: 213\_1819 June 2019).

## CONSENT

All participants provided consent to participate in the study and for their quotes to be used.

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