



Save the Children

Final Report

A QUALITATIVE SYNTHESIS
of CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES
from CONSULTATIONS on CIVIC PARTICIPATION
and GOVERNANCE 2015-2020

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Figure 1. *Bata Muna* recommendation on Governance Process of SK21

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCPC	Barangay Council for the Protection of Children
BDC	Barangay Development Council
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfer
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CWD	Children with Disabilities
DILG	Department of Interior and Local Government
DOLE	Department of Labor and Employment
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IAMTF	Inter-Agency Monitoring Task Force
IP	Indigenous People
KK	Katipunan ng Kabataan
LCPC	Local Council for the Protection of Children
LGU	Local Government Unit
LYDC	Local Youth Development Council
NGA	National Government Agency
NYC	National Youth Commission
OCD-DRRMO	Office of Civil Defense-Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office
PDAF	Priority Development Assistance Fund
PDAO	Persons with Disability Office
PNP	Philippine National Police
PYAP	Pag-Asa Youth Association of the Philippines
PYM	Pag-Asa Youth Movement
SALIGAN	Sentro ng Alternatibong Lingap Panligal
SCP	Save the Children Philippines
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SK	Sangguniang Kabataan
SPG	Supreme Pupil Government
SSG	Student Supreme Government
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
URS	Universal Referral System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In keeping with Save the Children’s goal of “strengthening resilience and participation of children through development and protection support”, the meaningful participation of children is not only embedded in objectives focused on education, protection, adolescent health, adolescent skills development, and humanitarian response, it is also explicitly referenced in three other objectives related to governance. Specifically, the objectives pertaining to children’s rights, children taking civic action, and the adoption of a national policy promoting children’s meaningful participation in all contexts, and institutionalizing child-centered social accountability.

Through these objectives, Save the Children evolves its child participation work, from engaging children through consultation and child’s rights awareness to capacitating children as social actors in both their localities and at the national level. In order to operationalize this, Save the Children embarked on a study that will consolidate and synthesize the results of these consultations with children from accountability reports (involving monitoring and evaluation reports) focused on the children’s perspectives on their participation in governance processes and their experiences in civic participation and engagement with government.

This research looked into six relevant documentation of previous activities supported by Save the Children. Content and thematic analysis were done based on the two major themes—children’s civic participation and children’s perspectives on governance and pre-identified sub-themes for each of the major themes. For the major theme on children’s civic participation, the following sub-themes are included—expression of opinion in public spaces, access to information, organizing and collective action, access to feedback and complaints mechanisms, participation in government decision-making processes, representation in government structures and electoral processes; while the major theme on children’s perspectives in governance include the following sub-themes—citizens’ engagement and dialogue, skills and capacities of government officials and service providers to address children’s rights and concerns, government policy/policy making, government planning, government budgeting and government transparency and accountability. Since only six documents were available, not all of the pre-identified sub-themes were substantially covered. Documentation of consultations only included summaries of the discussions and the children’s views; as such, perspectives of children were sometimes blended with those of the adult participants, which sometimes made it difficult to identify children’s narratives specifically.

Below are the key findings of the research based on the objectives:

1. While there has been observed increase in actual mechanisms and opportunities for children’s participation in many public spaces and in government, the level and extent of their participation has not influenced government decision making particularly in matters directly affecting them.

Increase in opportunities and actual mechanisms and structures for participation is significantly observed in many national government agencies (NGAs) as well as in local government unit (LGUs). At best, children’s engagement is generally perceived as appealing to both government and the children as well, and, at the minimum, as compliant to international and national instrumentalities/agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (international) and the inclusion of children as a basic sector traditionally marginalized by government (national). Much of children’s

engagement have been a product of citizens' engagement through child-focused civil society organizations (CSOs) with their governments and the continuing struggle to include the children's sector in government decision- and policy-making.

However, children (and CSOs alike) still raise concerns that their involvement in decision-making has remained *tokenistic*, akin to a 'tick-box' exercise for national- and local-levels of governments, and which fails to result in substantive change. Many proposals for legislation at the local level to further bolster children's participation have remained only as proposals. A wealth of ideas as inputs to these policy proposals have been generated from children's participation and yet the impacts of this participation on the lives of the children have remained wanting as frequently cited in the documents reviewed. They demand— as clearly articulated in all documentations— that ***participation is not enough; bolstered participation must result in political change in the formal institutions***, involving more responsive policies and more efficient and effective implementation of programs and delivery of services. Their voice must translate into choice and influence.

2. Children's actual participation in governance processes and structures have remained largely at the level of policy proposals but very little in making assessments on the impact of programs and services, as well as budgets on them.

The nature of children's lived experiences in participation in governance has been primarily in generating ideas about existing and forthcoming policies of government. ***Little, however, has been done in actual program implementation and service delivery where massive resources and budgets have been infused, as well as in the monitoring and evaluation of these programs and services designed by governments for children.*** In many of the documents reviewed, children manifest a clear sense of the government's inadequate performance in both policy development and service delivery for children. Issues raised about the effective and proper implementation of these policies and services include social protection programs, such as the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) for the poorest of the poor families, the use of Sangguniang Kabataan ((SK) funds, and the inadequacy and lack of quality health, nutrition, and education services especially for the vulnerable sectors of society (children with disabilities [CWDs], indigenous people's [IP] children, children of migrant families and solo parents, etc.) due to lack of budgets actually expended.

National government is still unable to reach the poorest of the poor families as intended by the CCT program, or have enrolled families who are ineligible as beneficiaries. SK funds have largely been determined by *barangay* heads for projects that boost their political stature and not for those that will ultimately benefit the children and the youth in their communities. Vulnerable sectors such as children with disabilities, children in IP communities, of migrant families and of solo parents have remained underserved in benefitting from health, nutrition and education services delivered by governments. And while many government units/agencies claim huge resources have been allocated for child-related programs, services and interventions, actual resources expended have remained insufficient to address the basic needs and concerns of children.

The children, and their families, who have the most to gain from participation are the very same people who have been more frequently excluded in government decision-

making processes at both policy-making and service delivery. Children are subject to intensive interventions and are some of the biggest users of public programs and services and yet they remain excluded from deliberations of such.

The study revealed children's strong interest in participating in governance areas of budgeting and monitoring and evaluation. They cite that it is in these areas that they will be able to maximize access to public funds for children and influence how it will impact their lives. However, data showed that these are also the areas where they are often left out. While some LGUs have started engaging children in their monitoring structures (i.e., Davao City's Inter-Agency Monitoring Task Force [IAMTF]), the nature of their participation remains, at most, contained in the provision of feedback.

What children are therefore saying indirectly is that their *participation must not only contribute to making governments more responsive*, but also, in the implementation of the extensive programs and services, *contribute to making governments more accountable* as government budgets are substantially poured into them.

3. The SK as described by many children as the most potent platform for their participation in civic affairs and governance have remain underutilized in ensuring more favorable outcomes for children.

Children are often referred to as the basic sector that are prohibited from being part of formal governmental institutions by virtue of their age. In the Philippines however, the *SK, as the children themselves have articulated, remains to be the most potential, strategic political platform for them to exercise their right to participation and make their voices heard*. As high and grandiose their expectations are about SK and the Katipunan ng Kabataan (KK), so are the children's disgruntlement and frustration about how they actually perform and deliver as public servants. It might be worthwhile for child-focused CSOs and children's organizations and networks to seriously examine and revisit their engagement and interventions at the SK and KK levels as these capture a broader scope of children's profiles, e.g., children of all ages, in-school and out-of-school youth, children with disabilities, IP children, and all other segments of the children sector that are most vulnerable.

4. While the school remains to be the first platform where children can exercise their right to participation, existing structures and processes for such purpose have remained underutilized. Moreover, its lack of links and collaboration with LGUs at the barangay level has missed out on opportunities for more broadened opportunities for civic participation.

Children have repeatedly expressed their aspiration to have choice and control over many aspects of their lives, and the school remains as a one of the primary arenas to realize such. *Existing structures and processes for children's participation in school, as well as honing their skills in leadership and their sense of citizenship, can be further strengthened*. In these settings, children can practice role playing as active citizens and future leaders and explore and advance their understanding and conceptions about these roles. If partnerships between LGUs and the schools are established, it can create an effective way to engage children in civic participation. According to children, their participation in school activities has driven their active participation in activities in their communities.

5. Access to information is key to children’s participation, thus, limited or no access at all to information severely constrains their opportunity and capacity to substantive and meaningful participation.

Children who have very limited or no access at all to information are more likely to continue to be marginalized and underrepresented. This is glaringly true for children with disabilities, IP children and, in the recent past, children of workers who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. These children have found a vast absence of their representation and participation in processes and mechanisms meant to draw out children’s perspective on matters concerning them. This situation demonstrates the persistence of the whole cycle of disempowerment and disenfranchisement.

Conversely, children who have greater access to information and are more aware of public spaces where they can express their opinions are more likely to be motivated and do actually participate in civic-oriented activities. Public spaces may start small and parochial, but they spark interest in children and hone their abilities to express their opinions, let their voices be heard, and gradually and eventually make a difference. Therefore, the basic need to make information more accessible is fundamental to fostering and strengthening children’s civic participation and governance.

6. While there are mechanisms and structures for children’s participation and public spaces that allow for their freedom of expression, these do not guarantee that their voices are actually heard and listened to. Various barriers to their participation persist.

As expressed clearly by children themselves, they feel that ***they are not taken seriously by adults***. They also have very little confidence that their concerns, views, and opinions will reach the appropriate local or national authorities. Children feel that they will only be listened to if their views and opinions are aligned with those of the adults’ or when they themselves are closely associated with concerned adults.

Children also fear reprisal from authority figures (e.g., teachers, school officials, local politicians). ***As they acquire critical thinking and begin to express their opinions more openly, they can come in conflict with cultural norms in the community*** and as such are often perceived as disrespectful (“*bastos*”). In cases where they are actually able to participate, children still feel excluded if the process and the discussion/language used are not child-friendly. Other barriers to child participation rights include limited budget allocated for activities where children can participate in various community activities and the lack of local officials’ political will to fully engage children in community affairs.

These experiences discourage children from expressing themselves and fully participating. Addressing these barriers is an important step towards the advancement of participation rights. It entails much social preparation work – both for duty bearers themselves and the community as a whole – to raise awareness on the importance and value of children’s participation and provide a safer space for children to have their voices heard.

To improve children’s participation, interventions need to be made at both sides of the arena—on the side of the children who speak and on the side of the adults who listen

to them. This study puts forward the following recommendations to further strengthen children's participation in governance.

1. For CSOs

- a. To maximize existing formal community-based (SK, KK and the Local Youth Development Council [LYDC]) and school-based (SPGs and SSGs) mechanisms since these are mandated by law and institutionalized within the LGU and the school governance system, respectively. Children's genuine participation and representation in these mechanisms will help ensure that their views and concerns are mainstreamed in decision-making processes in communities and schools.
- b. To support community-based children's groups especially the unorganized and the out-of-school (OSY) child youth to participate in the KK and the LYDC as a platform for them to participate in policy making at the barangay level.
- c. To establish partnership with the NYC, which is responsible for providing training to the SK and which serves as the National Secretariat for the SK National Federation. Design and implement capacity building programs on child participation in governance that are geared at ultimately developing children's knowledge and skills as active citizens in their own communities. Below is a list of topics for citizenship seminars lifted from the consultations on SK Reforms (2014)¹:
 - i. Training on human rights, child's rights and other key life and decision-making skills for SK and the KK;
 - ii. Analytical and critical thinking;
 - iii. Leadership trainings including topics on organizational management, financial management as well as project management (from planning to implementation to monitoring and evaluation);
 - iv. Orientation on fiscal system and taxation with the end in view of judicious growing of SK funds;
 - v. Policy development;
 - vi. Citizens'-based monitoring of government projects for the children, monitoring and auditing (fiscal and social) of SK budget and expenditures for KK; and
 - vii. Smart voting practices for KK.
- d. To explore partnership with the DILG and the Local Governance Officers at the LGU level in an effort to build the capacities of both the KK and the SK.
- e. To adopt strategies that go beyond supporting children's participation in formal structures towards instilling active citizenship among children and enabling them to directly contribute to solving problems in their communities as active agents of change.

¹ **Key results of the consultations on SK reform conducted by Bata Muna.** This unpublished document consolidates the results of area-based consultations conducted in 2014 by member organizations of the Bata Muna network on the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK; youth council) in response to initiatives in Congress to enact a law reforming the SK

- f. To maximize community-based children's associations and their activities as training ground for children to engage government.
- g. To embed participation rights in their other child-focused projects.

2. For NGAs/LGUs

- a. For DILG and the NYC, to assess the effectiveness of the SK and the KK as mechanisms for child and youth participation. These mechanisms and structures have been institutionalized and mainstreamed in the government's formal political and administrative system. Perhaps it is timely to do this to improve on existing structure, policies and processes so children can more genuinely participate in matters that affect them.
- b. For DepEd, to engage children in school governance through the student supreme governments including consulting them in their concerns and suggestions in relation to their education and other services within the school (e.g. health and nutrition, protection, water and sanitation), or in initiating conversations with their parents, families, and their communities about their issues and concerns,

Furthermore, DepEd can forge partnership with the barangay (through the BCPC) in addressing issues and concerns of children outside the school that can be referred to and resolved in the barangay.

- c. For LGUs, to establish more linkages and collaborative structures and processes with schools to effectively respond to issues raised by children, and to sustain and link children's engagement from within the school to the community.
 - d. Local and national governments must learn lessons on the new sociology of childhood where children are perceived and appreciated as competent actors of society, and, when given effective opportunities under clear guidance from adults and local authorities, can act independently and wisely, and contribute to making a difference for social change. Create convergences across the capacity building services for children being implemented by government and CSOs in partner communities.
3. In future documentations of related consultations and dialogues with children, CSOs can further enhance methods and tools for documenting consultations and workshops with children to effectively capture children's perspectives, including consultations and workshops that involve both children and adults. This is critical for building evidence on children's views on and experiences in children's participation.

I. INTRODUCTION²

Save the Children views children as active citizens; though needing more care and protection, children should be recognized as full members of society. A child's need for special care and protection should not override their civic and political rights. Alongside the children's economic, social, and cultural rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognizes children's civic and political rights. These rights enable them to exercise their citizenship to some extent, especially in relation to governance. From the Terms of Reference for this study, Save the Children refers to children's citizenship as follows:

".... the active participation of girls, boys and young people in the familial, social, economic, political and cultural arenas. It is an incremental process in which they develop the skills, understanding and values to influence decision-making and outcomes at local, national and international levels in an environment that recognizes them as competent social actors. It empowers them to exercise their rights and responsibilities alongside adults in the interest of both their peers and others."

Children as citizens are seen to be able to contribute to society not only in the future but also in the present. Their ability to exercise their citizenship rights and responsibilities evolve as they grow and learn. Children's rights to participation has been broadly promoted by child rights organizations to achieve other outcomes, but generally not as an end in itself. As a result, child participation initiatives have fallen short of improving children's position in society as they continue to be excluded from public decision-making. The systematic denial of children's civil rights disempowers children and contributes to their experiences of abuse, exploitation, and marginalization in society. Despite this, children continue to advocate for their rights and engage government to influence its decision making. A 2016 global research conducted by Save the Children and the Centre for Children's Rights revealed that 81% of children reported that they are interested in "decisions made by government and other people in positions of authority about issues and things happening in the community, country, or the world."

Two objectives related to governance explicitly refer to children's civil rights and children taking civic action.

- Girls and boys, especially those who are marginalized, are able to claim their rights, take civic action, and influence decision-making at different levels of government and in all contexts including conflicts and emergencies and in relevant Asian/ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and global arenas of decision-making.
- Children are claiming civic spaces including within cyberspace to take collective action and demand their rights and the rights of others.

A third objective aims at the adoption of a national policy promoting children's meaningful participation in all contexts and institutionalizing child-centered social accountability.

Recognizing this, Save the Children has placed children's meaningful participation at the core of its five-year strategy, with one of its goals aimed at "strengthening resilience and

²Terms of reference for the Consultancy on Research Synthesizing Children's Narratives on Civic Participation and Governance, Save the Children 2020.

participation of children through development and protection support”. Its three-year Country Strategy Plan embeds children’s meaningful participation in objectives focused on education, protection, adolescent health, adolescent skills development, and humanitarian response.

With these objectives, Save the Children is evolving its child participation work from engaging children through consultations and child’s rights awareness to capacitating children as active citizens and social actors at the local and national levels. Thus, Save the Children embarked on a study that will consolidate and synthesize the results of these consultations with children from accountability reports (reports on monitoring and evaluation) focused on the children’s perspectives on their participation in governance processes and their experiences in civic participation and engagement with government.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

It is the overall objective of the study to consolidate and synthesize the results from Save the Children organized/supported children’s consultations, accountability and monitoring reports, and evaluation reports focused on the perspectives of children on their participation in governance processes and their experiences in civic action and engagement with government.

The findings of the study will contribute to the (1) formulation of a strategy on children’s participation in governance; (2) development of a module on children’s human rights and civic education; and (3) drafting of a policy brief on the children’s civic participation.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study is essentially a *documentary research*, where documentations of relevant discussions and consultations with children were put together with monitoring and evaluative reports made by the children themselves and synthesized/coded based on the various pre-identified themes and sub-themes relating to child’s participation in decision making and governance. Children’s recommendations related to their civic participation, engagement with government, and the improvement of government stakeholders’ accountability were also cited.

Concretely, two principal areas of investigation were identified: (1) children’s views and experiences in civic participation; and (2), children’s perspectives related to governance.

Children's views on civic participation were analyzed according to the following subthemes:

- expression of opinion in public spaces including schools (at the community and national level);
- access to information;
- organizing and collective action;
- access to feedback and complaints mechanisms;
- participation in government decision-making processes;
- representation in government structures; and,
- electoral processes.

Children's perspectives related to governance were analyzed according to the following sub-themes;

- government policy/policy making;
- government planning;
- government budgeting;
- skills and capacities of government officials and service providers to address children's rights concerns; and,
- citizen engagement and dialogue and accountability to citizens (i.e., government directly engaging and listening to citizens).

The research also looked into a sixth subtheme, 'government transparency and accountability', as a substantial volume of data in the documents showed that it is an area important to children.

Limitations of the Study

The following documents were analyzed for the research.

- **"Key results of the consultations on SK reform conducted by Bata Muna."** This unpublished document consolidates the results of area-based consultations conducted in 2014 by member organizations of the Bata Muna network on the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK; youth council) in response to initiatives in Congress to enact a law reforming the SK;
- **"Focus Group Discussion: Public Spending on Children's Rights."** This is an unpublished report on children's consultations conducted in 2015 by Save the Children, the Civil Society Coalition on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC Coalition) and other CSOs in the National Capital Region/Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao on budgeting for children.:
- **"Children Speak Out on the Sustainable Development Goals."** Briefer on the highlights of a consultation with girls and boys from different parts of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao on the Sustainable Development Goals, conducted by Save the Children on May 27-28, 2019 in Quezon City;
- **Final Assessment Report for the "Kasama ang mga Bata sa Pamamahala: A Legal Empowerment Project of Children Aimed at Recognizing Children's Participation Rights in Governance,"** a partnership project implemented by the Sentro ng Alternatibong Lingap Panlegal (SALIGAN) in partnership with Save the Children. This unpublished report contains results of focus groups discussions conducted in 2017 with children from Quezon City, South Cotabato Province and Davao City who participated in the project;
- **"Child Participation in Governance Research Report: Illustrating Three Cases of Children's Participation In Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao."** This is a research report on child participation in governance with both children and duty bearers as participants conducted in Olongapo City, Cebu City, and Davao City; and,
- **"Child Rights in time of COVID-19: Philippine Context."** This is an unofficial report containing the preliminary result of the study on child's rights in the time of COVID-19 conducted in 13 regions of the country.

The documents included in the analysis constitute proceedings of consultations with children, evaluation studies and assessment reports conducted by Save the Children in relation to child participation and governance from 2014 to 2020.

In a few documents, children’s perspectives were blended with those of the CSO representatives’, as both participated in the consultation. As a result, researchers had to keenly discern whether the inputs, opinions, or recommendations raised were made by the children or the CSO representatives.

IV. SYNTHESIS and ANALYSIS

ON CHILDREN’S CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Theme 1: Expression of opinion in public spaces including schools (at the level of community and national level)

In all documents reviewed, children clearly stated their desire to express themselves – their aspirations and concerns – and be heard especially about matters that directly affect them.

Generally, they think that there are public spaces in several levels where they can express their opinions and make suggestions for the betterment of their communities. Examples of these spaces include the school, the barangays, mass media such as the radio, and social media platforms. Children express their opinions with a clear aim of wanting to have their voices heard, especially regarding issues that affect their sector. On their own and when given the opportunity, they conduct activities in the barangays where they reside to inform their fellow children about their rights and participate in local mechanisms and processes institutionalized by the Local Government Units (LGUs).

As reported, what singularly determines children’s active and sustained participation in local mechanisms and processes is their having undergone trainings and consultations initiated by CSOs. This is true for children’s groups and child-focused NGOs in the Quezon City and Davao City, and the province of South Cotabato. As a result, children develop a greater sense of power and confidence to voice out their concerns, express their opinions, and actively participate in activities in the pursuit of advocacies that they feel are important to them.

“We gained confidence in talking to others and we learned to be more vocal on issues that we believe in.” (11-year old child, South Cotabato)

Accompanying this confidence is the children’s fear of their opinions not being understood by the people within the aforementioned public spaces. Children know that they can voice out their opinions in public spaces, but for many, actually doing so would depend on what consequences they perceive will befall them afterwards. The children lament that the presence of these public spaces do not guarantee that their voices will be heard or that they will be able to contribute and effect the change that they desire.

In particular, the school is an arena where children feel capable of participating in decision-making activities while performing their duties as classroom officers. The Philippine formal school system has designed mechanisms not only for children’s participation, but also for leadership in school governance such as the Supreme Pupil Government (SPG) for

elementary students and the Student Supreme Government (SSG) for high school. SPG/SSG officers serve as leaders to their fellow children, with the councils operating as platforms where the constituents' concerns can be heard. Children's insights, especially from those who are disempowered, can alert the schools of the need to reshape policies and amend shortcomings.

The SPG and SSG are intended to provide learners formal venues where they can voice their concerns outside the classroom set-up and exercise a certain level of autonomy. Feedback from children indicates though that these structures are not inclusive and can be tokenistic. Some say that opportunities to be part of the SPG/SSGs are limited to honor students. In some consultations, children who are SSG officers shared their perception that the SSG is just an instrument for the school to undertake projects and not really to involve students in decision making of the schools. It merely executes the decision of the principal/school officials. To quote, *"Government and schools should encourage true child participation beyond tokenism. (We have observed that the student council only implements what the school wants). We want to be involved in the accountability mechanisms of our communities and schools so that we can contribute information unique to our perspective"*

However, children also cited challenges adjacent to their narratives about their free expression of opinions. They fear retaliation from teachers and worry about being judged by others, which result in their resolve to keep their opinions within bounds. It is also a challenge that not all school children have the courage to speak up about their concerns, particularly when teachers only respond only students with whom they are closely associated or they have an affinity. In one instance, an issue concerning the water system of the school was resolved after student council officers shared the problem with a teacher close to them.

In other public spaces or venues open for children – e.g., LGU/barangay structures, government agencies, etc., – children are hesitant to express their opinions because they feel that these will not reach the government anyway. Children feel that their opinions will only matter if these are aligned with the opinions of adults.

Theme 2: Access to information

Children assert their right to information:

"It is our right to know, to be informed. The government should inform us of any meetings/discussions concerning children and allow us to participate in the discussion."
-- Civil Society Coalition on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Inc.; Save the Children. Focus Group Discussion: Public Spending on Children's Rights.

Generally, children reported that they were able to participate in activities that cultivate their knowledge about their rights, to access relevant information and to express themselves in various spaces available to them.

Information accessed by children covers a broad range of concerns, ranging from government processes addressing their interest and welfare, government reports and documents about their rights, to information that can help them address and find solutions to their issues.

Children access information that they need mainly through their teachers, the internet, social media, and television. They also participate in local mechanisms such as the Barangay

Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC), but not too many are engaged in BCPC activities and even when they are, participation and access to information are very limited. Children are able to access information about crime prevention through awareness campaigns and child-centered seminars conducted in schools, while information about disaster risk reduction and management are learned through programs and trainings on life-saving skills provided by the LGU.

From the perspective of non-state program implementers such as CSOs, children access information about their rights and responsibilities through the channels created by CSOs where information is accessible and made more child-friendly. Children are further empowered with their access to important information through these channels and through encouragement from concerned organizations and individuals. Likewise, they think that barangay LGUs offer a way for children to participate in local processes and structures where they can access relevant information including their rights and the ordinances meant to promote and protect them.

For a number of children, they are able to access reports and official documents from barangay officials for the purpose of examining and assessing programs and services at the barangay level. It is worth noting that there are existing LGUs, such as Olongapo City, that conduct awareness building activities for children concerning their rights and provide venues for children's participation.

During the pandemic, children are able to access information about COVID-19 through the news on television, internet/social media, family members, and, albeit to a lesser extent, public announcements provided by their barangays and LGUs. Children realize the importance and urgency of such information communicated mainly through public announcements delivered through megaphones that go around the barangay.

However, there exist gaps in accessing information for children with different backgrounds. Children who have been exposed to participation in community affairs and politics at the city and barangay level tend to be more knowledgeable and willing to engage in civic participation compared to children who are only active in school-based groups. In contrast, children who are uninvolved in their communities or any organization know less about and are less likely to engage in civic-oriented activities. The role of concerned organizations, units, and individuals in shaping meaningful participation among children thus becomes vital in many aspects as pointed out by CSOs. When children are not able to voluntarily engage in civic participation, LGUs, schools, CSOs, and communities must take action to bridge the gap.

Theme 3: Organizing and Collective action

The children reported that they organized themselves and undertook collective action on advocacies such as environment, health, anti-bullying, drug addiction, pornography, internet addiction, early marriage, and teenage pregnancy with support from adults (e.g., CSOs and duty bearers). General assemblies of children in school were also used as a vehicle for their meaningful participation. They also voluntarily joined civic and political organizations and community-based children's groups to advocate for their issues.

During the pandemic, children reported joining the community and school-based groups in their areas that conduct COVID-19-related activities. Some of these activities include disseminating information and raising awareness about the pandemic, interviewing/checking/monitoring the situation, distributing relief good/hygiene kits, and

various other activities utilizing social media. Clearly, children who are made aware and empowered can act on their own and find ways to contribute to community efforts and be part of the solution.

Children have also reported participating in government-initiated/driven programs of other NGAs and entities such as the Philippine National Police (PNP). Examples include: Olongapo's 'Kids or Teens Patroller' where they are engaged in crime prevention through direct reporting, Olongapo City Office of Civil Defense-Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office's (OCD-DRRMO's) 'Junior Rescuers' which engages grade school, high school, and IP children in disaster management, and the DepEd's SPG/SSG where children are encouraged to participate in designated spaces.

When local authorities respond to children's advocacies and concerns, children feel that their voices are being listened to. However, this practice is often held back by existing cultural norms such as the child's complete deference to their parents. Doing child rights advocacy involves going against the points of view or challenging the behavior of adults including parents. Thus, children engaged in advocacy are often perceived as bastos or disrespectful. These experiences discourage children from speaking out and doing advocacy, and instead force them to exercise restraint or not engage at all. This power dynamics between children and adults, and especially with local authorities, coupled with adults' prevalent view of children as immature and impulsive, impede children's right to expression and taking action for their advocacies.

Theme 4: Access to feedback and complaints mechanisms

Some children believe that expressing their voice is their inherent right, and as such, they normally pay no mind to threats or scolding as long as they can air their complaints. In the cities of Davao, Cebu, and Olongapo and the municipality of Cordova in Cebu, there are established child-friendly mechanisms where children can report cases of abuse and violence against through a hotline. In the case of Davao City, children are also able to raise issues on child abuse during their regular Children's Congress. Associating with a friendly, responsive local official likewise creates opportunities for children to participate in processes where they may report their complaints.

Another venue for children to express their opinions and thoughts is mainstream media, such as the radio. Albeit limited, radio talk shows seem to be an effective way for children to have their complaints acted upon. It was observed that adults (including government officials) tend to respond to concerns raised by citizens including children when these concerns are raised in public such as over the radio. Still, the adults' responsiveness is more due to their fear of repercussions or complaints from other sectors of the community rather than being genuinely convinced of the need for action.

In barangays where there are active Children's Associations, it becomes another venue for children to put their feedback and complaints forward. However, children report that only a few barangays have active children's associations. When children were asked about what means existed for them to give feedback or make complaints – specifically about relief assistance or government actions addressing COVID-19 – children identified barangay officials, NGOs, and the police; still, a percentage of children also reported not knowing of any means.

Mechanisms for feedback and complaints are often ineffective without the support of a trusted adult advocate, or when said mechanisms are not known to children. Mostly, the children send their complaints and feedback through their SK Councilors and SK Chairperson who in turn convey the complaints to their *Punong* Barangay. As pointed out by the children, a major challenge in dealing with children's issues at the barangay level is that if the SK Chairperson championing issues raised by children is not in the same political party as the other SK Council members, their complaints will not be prioritized. As reported by the children, the same is true when the SK Chair and the *Punong* Barangay do not belong to the same political party.

Clearly, the patronage-based politics prevalent in many barangays hinder children's issues and complaints from being heard and acted on.

Theme 5: Participation in government decision-making processes

In most of the documents reviewed for this research, children stated that they should be directly involved in various decision-making processes on issues that affect them. Children think that it is important that they are consulted regarding all government programs that directly affect their sector. A number of means have been cited by the children.

At the national level, children, particularly those in the bracket of 15-17 years old and including out-of-school youth, reported experiencing government-driven processes sponsored by organizations such as the DSWD's *Pag-Asa* Youth Movement (PYM)/*Pag-Asa* Youth Association of the Philippines (PYAP). Beyond expressing opinions, children are also able to participate without fear in the form of involvement in various activities and creating potential solutions to problems raised during these fora.

Another is the Department of Labor and Employment's (DOLE's) Anti-Child Labor Desk where children's participation is solicited in the formulation of strategies to eliminate child labor. Profiling child laborers appears to be an effective strategy of determining helpful interventions from the government agency as a result of these consultations. However, CSOs working in this area also reported that there exist gaps within the internal system of DOLE which affects actual reporting and action on the issue of child labor.

At the local level, the Universal Referral System (URS), which covers the LGU's response to cases of abused children, was implemented by Davao City LGU in consultation with the children's sector. Many children reported being aware of local mechanisms such as the BCPC, SK, the Local Council for the Protection of Children (LCPC), and the Persons with Disability Affairs Office (PDAO). Still, for the children, the SK remains to be the mechanism that can serve as a good platform for their direct participation. This is observed in the children's participation in planning programs and implementing certain projects, as well as their memberships in Technical Working Groups. However, gaps created by age (i.e., SK tends to be dominated by the youth's agenda; many children are not organized) and inactiveness of officials in policy-making process compromise the principle of genuine and meaningful participation of children.

In Davao City, most of the Barangay Development Councils' (BDCs') development plans are crafted with inputs from the children, as the children and government come together to find joint solutions to problems affecting their sector. However, only a few BDCs have taken up this practice.

While there is a wealth of mechanisms and processes both at the national and local levels, children's participation has remained largely at the level of consultation and formal representation, and not in the actual decision making of government. The children feel that their voice must not only be *heard* but also be the catalyst to actually creating a difference in the affairs of their communities and their sector. For some sub-sectors within the children's sector – such as those from the indigenous communities – representation is not effective at all times, particularly when these children are merged with non-IP children who understandably possess different perspectives. Feelings of inferiority and the sense of subservience reportedly remain among the IP children; for non-IP children, manifestations of discrimination still remain, albeit discreetly.

Limitations on children's participation are also acknowledged. In the case of SK, the required age to be elected as SK official disqualifies those who are or below 18 years old; at the local levels, the very limited budget hinders children from participating meaningfully and from benefitting from development outcomes. In addition, children specifically cited that convening parents to attend parenting and other children-responsive seminars and activities becomes difficult when parents are not compensated for their attendance. Foregoing earnings for parents to participate in government consultative processes was cited by children as a barrier.

Children's limited access to relevant information such as about laws, policies and government programs, and services is also a barrier to their meaningful participation. Although institutional mechanisms for children's participation are in place as mandated by national laws and issuances – and in some LGUs, ordinances and resolutions – many children, especially school leaders as cited by the children, still remain unaware of them. Children think that the lack of awareness of children about institutional mechanisms that guarantee children's participation at the LGU level can be addressed through closer coordination between the LGUs and schools especially when it comes to sharing of information that is important to them.

Children also lament that adults, including local authorities, limit their participation to domestic chores (at the household level) and school activities (at the school level). Due to the lack, if not total absence, of knowledge about the formal venues for participation, children generally do not manifest any interest in engaging in civic-oriented activities at the community level, even at the Katipunan ng Kabataan (KK; local youth assembly). Moreover, children expressed their reservations about participating in governance. They note that, more often than not, what they observe government is doing (e.g., processes where the government engages with the citizens) are unfavorable for the children and because they want to avoid this negativity, they refuse to participate.

Though participation is evident across all government structures open to civic participation, there remain gaps and challenges that limit the children's meaningful participation. For one, children take issue about how the SK Reform Law define the age group among children that can engage government in matters directly affecting their sector. In Olongapo City for instance, the constriction is related to children being viewed as incapable of decision-making and participating in government matters as expressed by the children themselves. They feel the said law is flawed as it inadvertently discriminates those that are below 15 years old from the processes where children can elect or be elected as their representatives.

Through the KK, children likewise exercise their representation through meetings convened for the discussion of policy issues.

In the Child Participation in Governance Research Report: Illustrating Three Cases of Children's Participation in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, three children below 15 years old from Olongapo City cited feeling that their rights, based on what they experience, are limited to: 'survival, education, living a healthy life, interacting with others, doing household chores, helping others, and having new clothes'. Beyond those, they feel that they are not included in formal mechanisms mandated by law.

Lastly, the political will of duty bearers especially at the barangay level is a vital ingredient to drive meaningful participation of children. However, this is not always the case, as demonstrated in one instance in Davao City, where partisan politics in the BCPC curbs the participation of children. The selection of participants in BCPC discussions is reported to have been highly dependent on the discretion and political affiliations of *purok* leaders. Arbitrary or biased selection of participants in local mechanisms reduce the chance for equal opportunities of children to represent their sector and participate.

Theme 6: Representation in government structures

Government structures that guarantee children's participation are abundant. In schools, the SSG and the SPG are solidly in place; likewise, DSWD's PYM/PYAP meant for children between 15-17 years old are also functional.

At the city/municipal level, children can become members in local mechanisms such as the Inter-Agency Monitoring Task Force (IAMTF) of Davao City as mandated by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG). As such, children are able to participate in the validation of key services and concerns affecting their sector; their membership allows them to communicate their views, complaints and criticisms. In this mechanism, children are trained to conduct monitoring and validation of children's participation in governance through the mentorship of barangay social workers. The Task Force also serves as an instrument to monitor outcomes of decision- and policy-making on issues affecting the children's sector. The children shared that their participation in the validation process includes presenting documents and facilitating and providing feedback. A local ordinance meant to protect the interests of the local children's sector as well as institutionalize children's participation is in place.

In a few LGUs, children are allowed to vote for government-mandated structures. One example is the Children's Congress, where they get to elect their *purok*'s representative; in turn, members of the Children's Congress are elected by selected children-electors from every *purok*. In these structures, children are able to exercise their freedom to freely choose their representatives and, at the same, when elected, explore the opportunity to serve as representatives and be the voice of their sector.

At the community/barangay level, children are represented through the SK. Issues and feedback are collated by SK for formulation of proper interventions. At the city/municipal level, duty bearers describe children's representation as being in the form of membership the city's inter-agency mechanisms, such as the LCPC in local programs, and mechanisms, such as the Children's Congress of Davao City.

Theme 7: Electoral processes

Children below 15 years and below remain to be disenfranchised in the current electoral system as stipulate by the SK Reform Law. For those 15 years old and above, the only electoral process that children can participate in in the formal electoral system is the law-mandated election of SK Council members. Children agree that increasing the age of children who can participate in the SK elections from 15-17 years old to 18-24 years old and allowing only those above 18 to be elected as SK officials discriminates against children. Children generally feel that they are greatly disenfranchised. Still, the SK remains to be the most strategic institutionalized platform where children where children can participate in local governance, as it is where children can freely elect their representatives in the formal positions of power and authority inherent to the SK.

Children are also fully aware of and recognize that the SK is faced with a number of challenges. Many children reported that the SK has failed to address their interests/ concerns. They express their desire for government to use funds allotted to the SK to prioritize the provision of life skills training for children. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the SK for its inability to go beyond implementing local sports activities. Children asserted their desire, through the KK/SK, to be able to express their concerns about issues that may go beyond their localities. They also lamented the lack of information dissemination on SK activities, stating that no invitations to participate in activities are given or announced even in social media. They think that the *Sangguniang* Pambarangay (barangay council) should let children, through the SK, manage their own funds.³ While children appreciate its significance, some feel that the SK is too influenced by local politics and controlled by the barangay council, especially in terms of the management of SK funds.

Older children suggest that SK funds should be maximized to implement programs that address issues of out-of-school youth like subsidizing school fees and school supplies or a program similar to the conditional cash transfer (CCT).

ON CHILDREN’S PERSPECTIVES ON GOVERNANCE

Theme 1: Citizen engagement and dialogue (government directly engaging and listening to citizens)

Child-participants in all the consultations conducted are well aware of their right to participate as citizens. This awareness can largely be attributed to their active participation in awareness-building activities of Save the Children and other CSOs working on the promotion of child’s rights.

“Just because we are children doesn’t mean that we do not know anything. We are part of the society. We need to participate because we are citizens too.”

³ In RA 10742 known as “*Sangguniang Kabataan* Reform Act of 2015”, amending RA 8044 known as the “The Youth in Nation Building Act of 1993, one of the reforms installed was fiscal autonomy of SK from the *Sangguniang* Pambarangay. This is realized through the granting of power to the SK to approve the annual budget from the Annual Barangay Youth Investment Program (ABYIP) and for its Chairperson to ensure that all projects and activities included in the Comprehensive Barangay Youth Development Plan (CBYDP) are properly implemented.

“Government should include us in their consultations especially on matters that directly affect us.”

At the same time, while they recognize their right to participate, many participants think that there should also be limits on their participation. They think that only children 11 years old and above should be involved in decision-making about public spending as younger children may not be able to meaningfully participate and express their suggestions.

Children generally believe that regular dialogues between children and government officials is an effective way to reinforce children’s participation. However, children’s experiences with their respective LGUs prove otherwise. Children openly expressed their disgust and disappointment about their negative experiences with these LGUs. They feel that government belittles their importance and undermines their capacity to comprehend social issues.

“They (government) became closed minded instead of listening to us.”

“I think the government is belittling our capacities to learn and understand issues.”

Children feel that the government takes for granted their right, eagerness, and capacity to participate. They feel that their choices have no bearing on politics and governance because, after all, they do not vote.

“Maybe the government doesn’t find it important to include us in the discussion because we are not recognized as voters and won’t have an impact on politics”

Nevertheless, they feel that this disregard does not make them less important as they are the future of society. Though children are eager to help even through most humble means, their participation is not appreciated, and children lose interest in voicing out their demands.

Even during the current COVID-19 pandemic, majority of the children feel that they have been left out in processes that would clarify their situation and identify their needs. In particular, more children who self-reported belonging to an ethnic group say that they were not consulted at all. Children report that it was the NGOs – rather than their barangays, schools, and families or relatives – who consulted with them the most.

Many children are only able to engage government in matters that directly affect them through CSO-initiated consultations and fora; likewise, they have already received some form of intervention/capacity building from these CSOs or government programs on children.

Theme 2: Skills and capacities of government officials and service providers to address children’s rights and concerns

Children regard the skills and capacities of government officials and service providers to address children’s rights and concerns both positively and negatively. On one hand, children respect and recognize what government is doing insofar as children’s rights are concerned.

“I have the highest respect for what they are doing minus the politics.”

On the other hand, children cited their negative experiences with government’s skills and capacities.

“We realized that the government acts very slow.”

“They are not doing their job

“We learned that the government could not address all of the issues in our community”

Additionally, CSOs and other stakeholder groups would assert that LGUs (particularly the barangay) lack the necessary understanding of children’s rights to participation and the skills to support children’s meaningful participation.

Majority of children think that their families and communities have received assistance from either the barangays or the city level LGU. However, these relief and fund assistance were neither enough nor of good quality, especially for those from large households.

Theme 3: Government policy/policy making

There appears to be a dearth of inputs in this thematic area. Notes lifted from the documents reviewed talk about the perspective of CSOs. As regards policy-making, children suggest to enact laws for children and persons with disabilities to promote equality.

“Gumawa ng mga batas para sa mga bata at mga may kapansanan para pantay-pantay.”

Theme 4: Government Planning

In the Final Assessment Report of ‘Kasama ang mga Bata sa Pamamahala Project’ of SALIGAN, one of the lessons learned during implementation is that: “...despite being child-focus, low priority is given to the aspect of children’s right to participation in governance as partner CSOs and LGUs (at least in Quezon City) mainly focus on children’s rights to protection and development, as well as upholding the best interest aspects of children’s rights.” This lesson learned is somehow evidenced by children’s perception that the government takes for granted their capacity to understand social issues.

“Equity is just as important, if not better than, equality. Not all us are getting the quality of education, nutrition, protection and care that we need...”

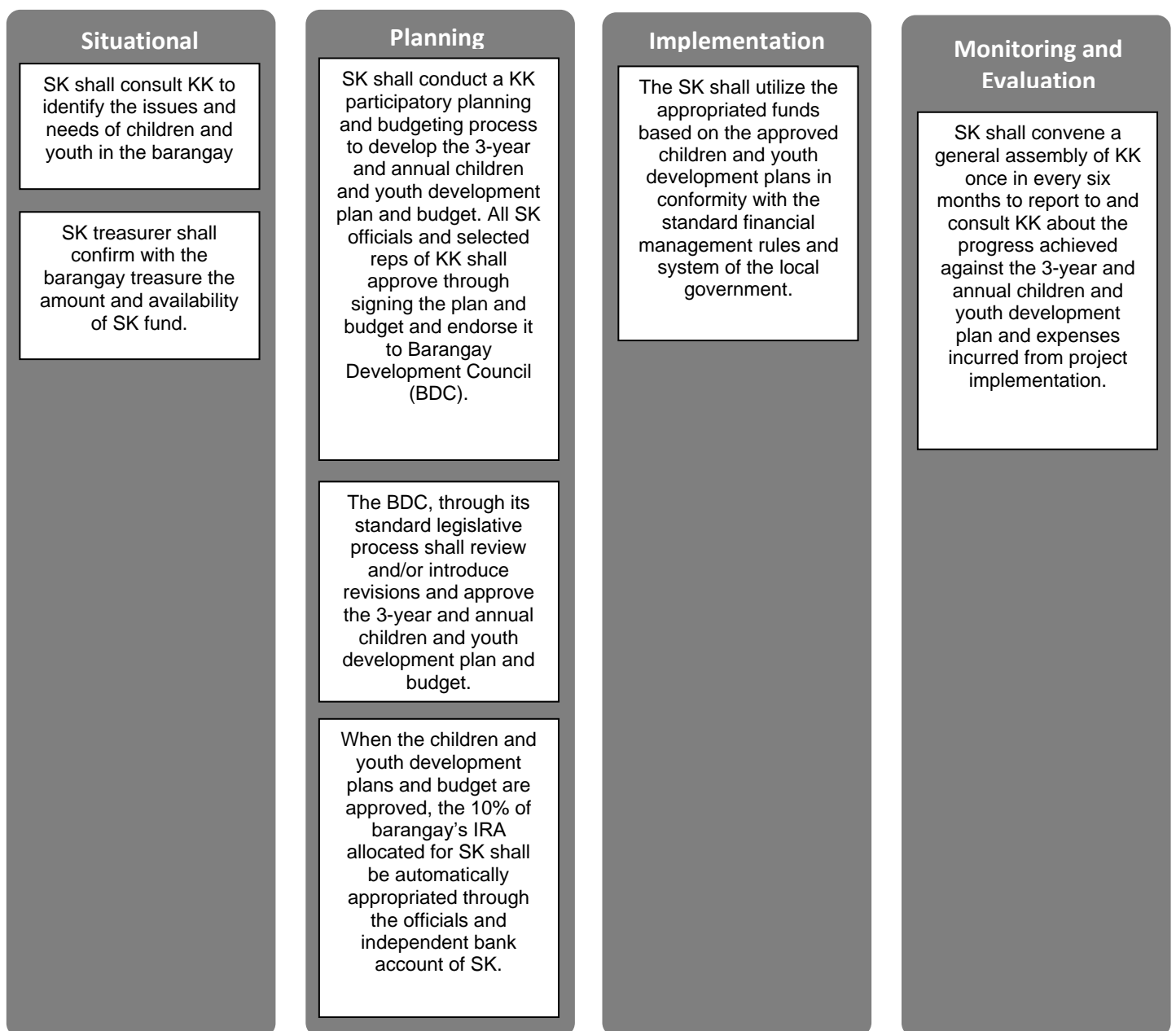
Furthermore, government plans need to incorporate the education of all children on their rights. They must also endeavor to engage in partnerships with the CSOs in promoting children’s rights.

To improve the planning process, children think the government should regularly conduct consultations with children in order to clearly understand what they need, the issues affecting them, and the problems they face every day. Government should also be able to determine what is urgent and ensure immediate release of funding especially to poverty-stricken children. Children-respondents also suggest organizing consultations exclusive for children, or the creation of a children’s parliament to provide an opportunity for children to voice their ideas, thoughts, and feelings, similar to the Croatian children’s council. For them, these mechanisms can enable government’s awareness and appreciation of children’s situation. Efficient planning among the different sectoral concerns in government can maximize funds and ward against duplication of projects.

Moreover, children recommend for government to conduct studies and researches to inform their decisions. Government plans must be based on evidence that accurately depict the children’s realities. One participant gave an example of both a hospital and a health clinic built close to each other in his area, as these address the need for proximity of primary and secondary/tertiary health facilities for the community’s health.

According to *Bata Muna*, “greater fiscal autonomy is deemed necessary to enable SK to effectively perform their duties and responsibilities. Nevertheless, fiscal autonomy should go hand in hand with accountability -- not just for the utilization of funds but also for the meaningful participation of KK in the local governance process”. Consequently, *Bata Muna* recommends a process of governance of SK described in the sample diagram below.

Figure 1. *Bata Muna* recommendation on Governance Process of SK



Theme 5: Government Budgeting

In terms of prioritization, children suggest that government needs to improve the provision of basic services such as free education (e.g., subsidies for education expenses, school supplies, and improvement of school facilities), healthy food, clothes and housing, and health services. Government must also take action to establish programs that will benefit children in different situations, ensure that basic commodities are affordable, and secure safe spaces for children to play. Furthermore, government needs to provide special attention to marginalized children by recognizing their needs. With special concern, they cite the lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) community among children, impoverished and street children, children of indigenous communities, children who are victims of disasters, children with disabilities, and child laborers.

Children think that government should prioritize the allocation of budget for the following specific rights:

First, their right to survival, which entails allocations for health (i.e., more health services including dental, doctors and hospitals), efforts to eliminate malnutrition, and aid for victims of calamities and disasters (e.g., typhoons, earthquakes, fire landslides).

Second, their right to development, which entails allocations for education, specifically to: reduce teacher-pupil ratio to improve student learning; increase the number of classrooms and the volume of school supplies; increase financial assistance to children who cannot afford to stay in school and those who wish to pursue higher education through scholarships; and, grants. Special mention was made about indigenous children who have yet to access formal education, modules on life skills, and livelihood and capacity building for children and their parents. Their right to development also entails allocations for the creation of more safe spaces for children where they can play.

And third, their right to exercise their privacy, which falls under their civil rights.

Children also cited the need for more support to families of children who cannot afford sufficient food and decent shelter through housing projects or free housing materials.

Older children (ages 13 and above) mentioned that their participation rights should also be prioritized and given larger budgets, such as to facilitate their participation in SK. However, older children are torn between continuing or abolishing SK as a venue for children's participation in governance and where their voices can be heard.

As for children with disabilities, their concerns are similar to those of younger and older children, noting in particular their survival rights (i.e., livelihood for their parents, permanent shelter, and government support for food, medicines/medical care, and clothing) and development rights in terms of education. Children with disabilities feel that there should be more teachers and interpreters for them, and that they should have the needed competencies to help children cope with their disabilities. Furthermore, children with disabilities say that there should be funds to provide support for their caregivers.

For children to fully enjoy their rights, children assert that government should use public funds properly, strengthen children's participation, improve education and basic services especially for marginalized children, increase children's awareness of their rights,

reduce child abuse cases, and ensure that children are not neglected. Government should nourish partnerships with NGOs to better monitor the implementation of programs and services for children.

Older children suggest that government promote meaningful children's participation in public finance by taking into account children's differing capacities in terms of ability and age, and other relevant factors. In capacitating children on public budgeting and spending, the discussions should be conceptually accurate but child-friendly. Children with disabilities suggest for either parents to form an organization to represent their children, or for children with disabilities to organize themselves and represent their sector in discussions with the government.

Theme 6: Government Transparency and Accountability

Transparency in government essentially involves creating ways for the public to see and understand more easily decisions made and actions performed by government. As such, it entails openness, communication and accountability. Being accountable further means the obligation and the ability to acknowledge and assume responsibility, be answerable for actions, decisions and policies and their resulting consequences.

Children suggest that public funds must be properly used by government, and that public spending must be disclosed and duly reported to the public. Data on public spending must show complete information such as purpose of the project, details on public bidding, status, and budget, among others. If the citizens, including children, are aware of where money is spent, they can propose other projects to be prioritized, such as additional school buildings instead of reconstruction of roads.

“Government should be able to show that they have done something from the people's money.”

Notes from the discussions on public spending show that children are aware of the problem of corruption or the misuse of public funds. Older children went on to suggest mechanisms for government to monitor its ability to respond to the needs of the marginalized. They suggest visits to poverty-stricken areas to ascertain if public funds had been equally distributed. They also suggest the reassessment of the CCT program beneficiaries as many children think that the inclusion of some beneficiaries is questionable (specifically those that can afford basic necessities) and therefore must be revoked. They think that there should be appropriate monitoring and processes between national and local governments, particularly in the dispensation of public funds for specific purposes.

Government should make efforts to disseminate relevant information to children, including delivering progress reports in a child-friendly language.

To curb corruption, children suggest that government retrieve public funds pocketed by corrupt officials and allocate them to services for children, alleviating poverty, and educating children on their rights. Government should manage funds accordingly and cease the practice of corruption, as government officials should not steal or use funds for personal interest.

Children call for the implementation of anti-corruption laws and the prosecution of corrupt officials. To address corruption, the government should abolish the Priority

Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) of district representatives and anything similar that promotes corruption. Children believe that there should also be checks and balances in local leadership.

For children with disabilities, they assert that they should have avenues of participation or representation in decision making as well as monitoring bodies on public spending.

To make government more accountable, government officials should make decisions for the people's benefit and not for personal or political gains. Children assert that the government should serve the interest of the people and that children should be able to feel the impact of government's investment in children.

"We hope to maximize access to everything that the government is spending on for children to resolve children's issues and whatever is due based on our rights."

The following are the children's concepts of accountability, based on their own words:

- *"Government officials should make decisions for the people's benefit and not for personal or political gains."*
- *"Children believe that all citizens, including children should be consulted in all matters of governance (Decision-making should come from the citizenry and not the mayor.)"*
- *"The government should serve the interest of the people."*
- *"We should be able to feel the impact of the investment on children. We hope to maximize access to everything that the government is spending on for children to resolve children's issues and whatever is due based on our rights." (write in a box)*

With regards to the SK as the potential principal political platform for the realization of the child's right to participation, children think that the new law on the SK further guarantees its fiscal autonomy. In their perception, SK funds can now be translated into plans and budgets by the children themselves without the interference of the Punong Barangay who often practice patronage-based politics and who practically control what projects will be formulated and how much budget such projects would receive.

And while children recognize the depth of this responsibility, they also propose fiscal autonomy alongside measures for stringent accountability from its officials. In the SK governance process proposed by *Bata Muna*, it clearly depicts the inclusiveness and equity that children wish the SK would practice (i.e., having to convene the KK in their respective communities composed of all registered youth in the barangay) and the evidence-based planning of development projects for children and youth (i.e., having to commence the planning process with a situational analysis of the children's situation in their communities).

But the process does not stop at implementing approved projects – as such, a system of periodic monitoring (e.g., per semester) must be installed to examine the progress made in the implementation of approved projects and the accounting of expenses thus incurred. Evidently, with such processes, accountability mechanisms are put in place with the children's active and informed participation.

Therefore, when reforms in the new SK law are effectively, properly, and completely undertaken, the SK realizes its full potential to be the major political platform for children to

participate in the formal governance system regardless of gender, socio-economic status, religion, educational attainment, differences in abilities, and presence of disabilities.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Research Team has attempted to establish linkages and interconnections among the themes with the following conclusions:

1. Documents reviewed showed evidence that there is increasing opportunities and institutionalized mechanisms and structures for participation within NGAs and LGUs. At best, children's engagement is generally perceived as appealing to both government and the children as well, and, at the minimum, as compliant to international and national instrumentalities/agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (international) and the inclusion of children as a basic sector traditionally marginalized by government (national). Much of children's engagement have been a product of citizens' engagement through child-focused CSOs with their governments and the continuing struggle to include the children in government decision- and policy-making.

However, children (and CSOs alike) still raise concerns that their involvement in decision making has remained *tokenistic*, a 'tick-box' exercise for national- and local-levels of governments, and which fails to result in substantive change. Many proposals for legislation at the local level to further bolster children's participation have remained only as proposals. A wealth of ideas as inputs to these policy proposals have been generated from children's participation and yet the impacts of this participation on the lives of the children have remained wanting as frequently cited in the documents reviewed. They demand – as clearly articulated in all documentations – that ***participation is not enough; bolstered participation must result to political change in the formal institutions***, involving more responsive policies and more efficient and effective implementation of programs and services. Their voice must translate into choice and influence.

2. The nature of children's lived experiences in participation in governance has been primarily in generating ideas about existing and new, forthcoming policies of government. ***Little however has been done for children to participate in the monitoring and evaluation of actual service delivery where massive resources and budgets have been infused.*** In many of the documents reviewed, children manifest a clear sense of the government's performance (or lack thereof). Issues raised about the effective and proper implementation of these policies and services include social protection programs, such as the CCT program of the DSWD for the poorest of the poor families, the use of (SK) funds, and the inadequacy and lack of quality health, nutrition, and education services especially for the vulnerable sectors of society (children with disabilities, IP children, children of migrant families and solo parents, etc.) due to lack of budgets.

The children, and their families, who have the most to gain from participation, are the very same people who are least likely to have participated in both policymaking and government service. Children are among the biggest users of public programs and services and yet they remain excluded from deliberations of such.

The study revealed children's interest in participating in budgeting and in monitoring and evaluation. Children cited that it is in these areas that they will be able to maximize access to public funds for children and influence how it will impact their lives. However, data showed that these are also the areas where they are often left out. While some LGUs have started engaging children in their monitoring structures (i.e., Davao City's IAMTF), the nature of their participation remains, at most, limited to providing feedback.

What children are therefore saying indirectly is that their *participation must not only contribute to making governments more responsive*, but also, in the implementation of the comprehensive programs and services, *contribute to making governments more accountable* as government budgets are substantially poured into them.

3. Children are often referred to as the basic sector that are prohibited from being part of formal governmental institutions by virtue of their age. In the Philippines however, the *SK has been mandated by law, and as the children themselves have articulated, remains to be the most potential, strategic political platform for them to exercise their right to participation and make their voices heard*. While their expectations about SK and the KK are high, children also feel disgruntled by and frustrated with how the SK actually performs and delivers as public servants.

It might be worthwhile for child-focused CSOs and children's organizations and networks to seriously examine and revisit their engagement and interventions at the SK and KK levels as these capture a broader scope of children's profiles, e.g., children of all ages, in-school and out-of-school youth, children with disabilities, IP children, and all other segments of the children sector that are most vulnerable. A review of these mechanisms for a broader children's participation at the community level would be an important step to determine its effectiveness and identify areas for improvement so that it can truly serve as the main political platform for children. Other recommendations from children are as follows: (1) Include children 17 years old and below as voters for SK; (2) Adopt a more inclusive process (see Figure 1 above) to ensure that more meaningful participation is embedded in the system.

4. Children have repeatedly expressed their aspiration to have choice and control over many aspects of their lives, and the school remains as a one of the primary arenas to realize such. Existing structures and processes for children's participation in school can be further strengthened. School curriculum can also include topics or activities that will help build children's leadership skills and instill a sense of citizenship. In these settings, children can be presented with opportunities to exercise citizenship through role plays and by implementing mini projects that can help address pressing issues in their communities, and explore and advance their understanding and conceptions about being citizens and future leaders. If partnerships between LGUs and the schools are established, it can create an effective way to engage children in civic participation. According to children themselves, their participation in school activities themselves has an effect of spilling over to their respective communities.
5. *Children who have very limited access to information*, including existing mechanisms and structures for children to participate, *are more likely to continue to be marginalized and underrepresented*. This is glaringly true for children with disabilities, children from indigenous communities, and, during the pandemic,

displaced workers. They are the ones most likely to have no representation and participation in processes and mechanisms meant to draw out children's perspective on matters concerning them. This situation demonstrates the persistence of the whole cycle of disempowerment and disenfranchisement.

Conversely, children who have greater access to information and are more aware of public spaces where they can express their opinions are more likely to be motivated and actually participate in civic-oriented activities. Public spaces may start small and parochial, but they spark interest in children and hone their abilities to express their opinions, let their voices be heard, and gradually and eventually make a difference. Therefore, access to information is fundamental to fostering and strengthening children's civic participation and governance.

6. While there are mechanisms and structures for children's participation and public spaces that allow for their freedom of expression, these do not guarantee that their voices are actually heard and listened to. As expressed clearly by children themselves, they feel that they are not taken seriously by adults. They also have very little confidence that their concerns, views, and opinions will reach the appropriate local or national authorities. Children feel that they will only be listened to if their views and opinions are aligned with those of the adults' or when they themselves are closely associated with concerned adults.

Children also fear reprisal from authority figures (e.g., teachers, school officials, local politicians). As they acquire critical thinking and begin to express their opinions more openly, they can come in conflict with cultural norms in the community and as such can be perceived as disrespectful ("*bastos*"). In cases where they are actually able to participate, children still feel excluded if the process and the discussion/language used are not child-friendly. Other barriers to child participation rights include limited budget for participation-related activities in the community and the lack of local officials' political will to fully engage children in community affairs.

These experiences discourage children from expressing themselves and fully participating. Addressing these barriers is an important step towards the advancement of participation rights. It entails much social preparation work – both for duty bearers themselves and the community as a whole – to raise awareness on the importance and value of children's participation and provide a safer space for children to have their voices heard.

7. CSOs and their networks have clearly brought children into the public sphere of civil society, giving them opportunities to raise their voices and apply their influence within policy discourses, albeit at a limited scope. CSOs serve as key intermediaries between the hierarchies of those in power and authority, and the community- and grassroots-based children's groups who would have remained anonymous and unknown to both the public's and the government's eyes. They clearly remain the main drivers and agents for building awareness, and supporting the collective action of the children sector.

VI. PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The child's right to participation is premised on the understanding that children, when given access to information and properly guided by adults, are competent enough to make decisions and can play active roles in their own settings and build social relationships that can assist them in the pursuit of their personal goals and those of their communities'. Children report that public *spaces* have been created to facilitate their participation, alongside mechanisms set up to ensure that their *voices are heard* and that they are provided with *effective representation*. However, the audiences to whom these voices speak have largely remained unconverted and unreformed; thus, these voices have neither been translated to actual power and influence nor been acted on.

To improve children's participation, interventions need to be made at both sides of the arena—on the side of the children who speak and on the side of the adults who listen to them. This study puts forward the following recommendations to further strengthen children's participation in governance.

1. For CSOs

- a. To maximize existing formal community-based (SK, KK and the Local Youth Development Council [LYDC]) and school-based (SPGs and SSGs) mechanisms since these are mandated by law and institutionalized within the LGU and the school governance system, respectively. Children's genuine participation and representation in these mechanisms will help ensure that their views and concerns are mainstreamed in decision-making processes in communities and schools.
- b. To support community-based children's groups especially the unorganized and the out-of-school (OSY) child youth to participate in the KK and the LYDC as a platform for them to participate in policy making at the barangay level.
- c. To establish partnership with the NYC, which is responsible for providing training to the SK and which serves as the National Secretariat for the SK National Federation. Design and implement capacity building programs on child participation in governance that are geared at ultimately developing children's knowledge and skills as active citizens in their own communities. Below is a list of topics for citizenship seminars lifted from the consultations on SK Reforms (2014)⁴:
 - i. Training on human rights, child's rights and other key life and decision-making skills for SK and the KK;
 - ii. Analytical and critical thinking;
 - iii. Leadership trainings including topics on organizational management, financial management as well as project management (from planning to implementation to monitoring and evaluation);

⁴ **Key results of the consultations on SK reform conducted by Bata Muna.** This unpublished document consolidates the results of area-based consultations conducted in 2014 by member organizations of the Bata Muna network on the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK; youth council) in response to initiatives in Congress to enact a law reforming the SK

- iv. Orientation on fiscal system and taxation with the end in view of judicious growing of SK funds;
 - v. Policy development;
 - vi. Citizens'-based monitoring of government projects for the children, monitoring and auditing (fiscal and social) of SK budget and expenditures for KK; and
 - vii. Smart voting practices for KK.
- d. To explore partnership with the DILG and the Local Governance Officers at the LGU level in an effort to build the capacities of both the KK and the SK.
 - e. To adopt strategies that go beyond supporting children's participation in formal structures towards instilling active citizenship among children and enabling them to directly contribute to solving problems in their communities as active agents of change.
 - f. To maximize community-based children's associations and their activities as training ground for children to engage government.
 - g. Embed participation rights in their other child-focused projects.

2. For NGAs/LGUs

- a. For DILG and the NYC, to assess the effectiveness of the SK and the KK as mechanisms for child and youth participation. These mechanisms and structures have been institutionalized and mainstreamed in the government's formal political and administrative system. Perhaps it is timely to do this to improve on existing structure, policies and processes so children can more genuinely participate in matters that affect them.
- b. For DepEd, to engage children in school governance through the student supreme governments including consulting them in their concerns and suggestions in relation to their education and other services within the school (e.g. health and nutrition, protection, water and sanitation), or in initiating conversations with their parents, families, and their communities about their issues and concerns, Furthermore, DepEd can forge partnership with the barangay (through the BCPC) in addressing issues and concerns of children outside the school that can be referred to and resolved in the barangay.
- c. For LGUs, to establish more linkages and collaborative structures and processes with schools to effectively respond to issues raised by children, and to sustain and link children's engagement from within the school to the community.
- d. Local and national governments must learn lessons on the new sociology of childhood where children are perceived and appreciated as competent actors of society, and, when given effective opportunities under clear guidance from adults and local authorities, can act independently and wisely, and contribute to making a difference for social change. Create convergences across the capacity building

services for children being implemented by government and CSOs in partner communities.

- 3. In future documentations of related consultations and dialogues with children, CSOs can further enhance methods and tools for documenting consultations and workshops with children to effectively capture children's perspectives, including consultations and workshops that involve both children and adults. This is critical for building evidence on children's views on and experiences in children's participation.**

List of Documents Reviewed

1. Civil Society Coalition on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Inc.; Save the Children. Focus Group Discussion: Public Spending on Children's Rights.
2. Diola, F.L., et. al. 2019. Child Participation in Governance Research Report: Illustrating Three Cases of Children's Participation In Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. Report from Save the Children.
3. "*Kasama ang mga Bata sa Pamamahala*": A Legal Empowerment Project of Children Aimed at Recognizing Children's Participation Rights in Governance. Final Assessment Report by SALIGAN.
4. Key results of the consultations on SK reform conducted by Bata Muna. Save the Children.
5. Save the Children. 2020. Child Rights in time of COVID-19: Philippine Context. Preliminary Results.

RESEARCH BRIEFER
SAVE THE CHILDREN: CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES STUDY

Save the Children embarked on a documentary research that consolidated and synthesized the results of studies, consultations with children, monitoring/accountability reports prepared by children themselves, evaluation reports focusing on their experiences in civic participation and engagement with government, and their perspectives on governance that they conducted for the period of 2015-2020. Content and thematic analysis were done based on the two major themes mentioned above.

The study clearly highlighted children's desires and aspirations to participate in matters that directly affect them in all settings, be it at home, in school, in the community, and even in broader society. These aspirations are concretely directed not only at meaningful and substantive participation, but also to the opportunity to effect political changes in the formal governance institutions and processes. Participation for children means not only generating ideas about existing and forthcoming policies of government, but likewise in monitoring and evaluating child-centered programs and services provided by public institutions.

Children also demand more transparency and accountability from government. Likewise, this holds true for the SK and KK, which many children still regard as the most plausible and strategic political platform for them to exercise their right to participation and make their voices heard and capable of making a difference.

Findings from the study also revealed the numerous barriers to the effective exercise of this right for children. Children feel that adults in general and local authorities in particular do not take them seriously as they are regarded as mere children, incapable of making sound judgment and decisions about matters that affect them. Lacking the right and the power to vote also makes a difference in how children's opinions are received.

Children think that having views that are aligned or closely associated with adults' better enables their participation and influence on the adults' decisions. Expressing their views, particularly those contrary to the adults', is considered rude and irreverent, a perception which further demotivates children and strips them of their desire and aspiration to participate in any mechanisms or processes initiated and driven by local authorities. Addressing these barriers is an important step towards the advancement of children's right to participation.

Recommendations are put forward to increase awareness and build the capacities of duty bearers and the community as a whole in order to heighten recognition of the importance and value of children's participation and provide a safer space for children to have their voices be heard. Furthermore, it was proposed that the children's sector be strengthened by instilling a more active and vibrant sense of citizenship for broadened civic engagement and electoral participation.

Integral to this sense of citizenship is mobilizing the children's sector for the development of a reform agenda directly addressing children's issues and concerns, as well as participation in electoral campaigns for more reform-oriented candidates, not as voters but as ultimate users of the governments' policies, programs, services, and budgets.