

How Meaningful Participation of Children & Youth Can Lead to Peace: Building a Theory and Developing Practical Suggestions

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INTRODUCTION

Children have the right to participate as written down in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹ However, this is only one good reason to promote the participation of children and youth in society. The inclusion of children and youth in debate and decision-making at every level is a key enabler of lasting peace and social justice. In this paper, I will show how meaningful participation of children and youth can lead to peace. Drawing on the concept of just peace, I argue that peace, justice, and equality can only be realized if children and youth get their share of influence on political, economic, social, and cultural decisions.

Participation of children and youth has the potential to challenge previously held structures and beliefs that perpetuate social inequality and cause violence. Furthermore, participation of children and youth strengthens communities and empowers children in a way that increases their resilience. Participation then also prevents children and youth from joining radical groups. Despite these positive effects that participation can have on society, participation of children and youth is not taken seriously in most countries. Many attempts to implement children's article 12 right to be heard and have their opinions taken into consideration are single one-off events, designed and controlled by adults. Such attempts cannot be considered meaningful participation.

Meaningful participation is more than an educational effort to turn children into responsible citizens. Children and youth must have the opportunity to impact decisions at the local, national, regional, and international level. Children must be understood as subjects and actors in society. A rights-based approach, which has been adopted by many child rights and development organizations in recent years, can help realize the right to participation on the way to lasting peace and social justice. However, even if a rights-based approach is followed, peace, justice, and equality will not be achieved unless power is shared at all levels and hierarchies are dismantled.

In the following, I will show how meaningful participation of children and youth can lead to peace. I will then elaborate on the concept of just peace and human security which underlie my theory of participation and peace. Next, I will discuss what meaningful

¹ Article 12.1 reads: "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (United Nations 1989).

participation entails. Finally, I will stress the importance of political participation of children and youth, and share some examples of how children can take action.

For this paper, I rely on English and German language academic works relating to child rights, child participation, and peace, but also on documents and experiences from the development and child rights organization World Vision. During my work with World Vision Germany in 2015, I saw that World Vision is investing much work in the area of child participation – whether by conducting research or organizing events – and is constantly developing expertise on the matter. While other NGOs have equally increased their efforts in the field of child participation in recent years, my personal relation to World Vision led me to rely on documents and experience from this particular organization.

As apparent from my approach, this paper is theoretical in nature. It should provide inspiration for debate and further academic work on the subject. Especially empirical studies on the causality between participation and peace are needed in order to test the theory. This paper is written from an adult perspective. Research with children on the issues of participation and peace is necessary to make heard and understand children's views on the subject.

2 HOW MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN & YOUTH CAN LEAD TO PEACE

In this part of the paper, I argue that meaningful participation of children and youth can lead to peace. My understanding of “peace” and “meaningful participation” will be the focus of the next parts of this paper since I want to cover these concepts extensively. In the following, I will present several sub-arguments that support my overall argument as stated above. These arguments are not based on my own empirical research but rather constitute assumptions based on studies by other authors. They are elements on the way to a theory of how meaningful participation of children and youth can lead to peace.

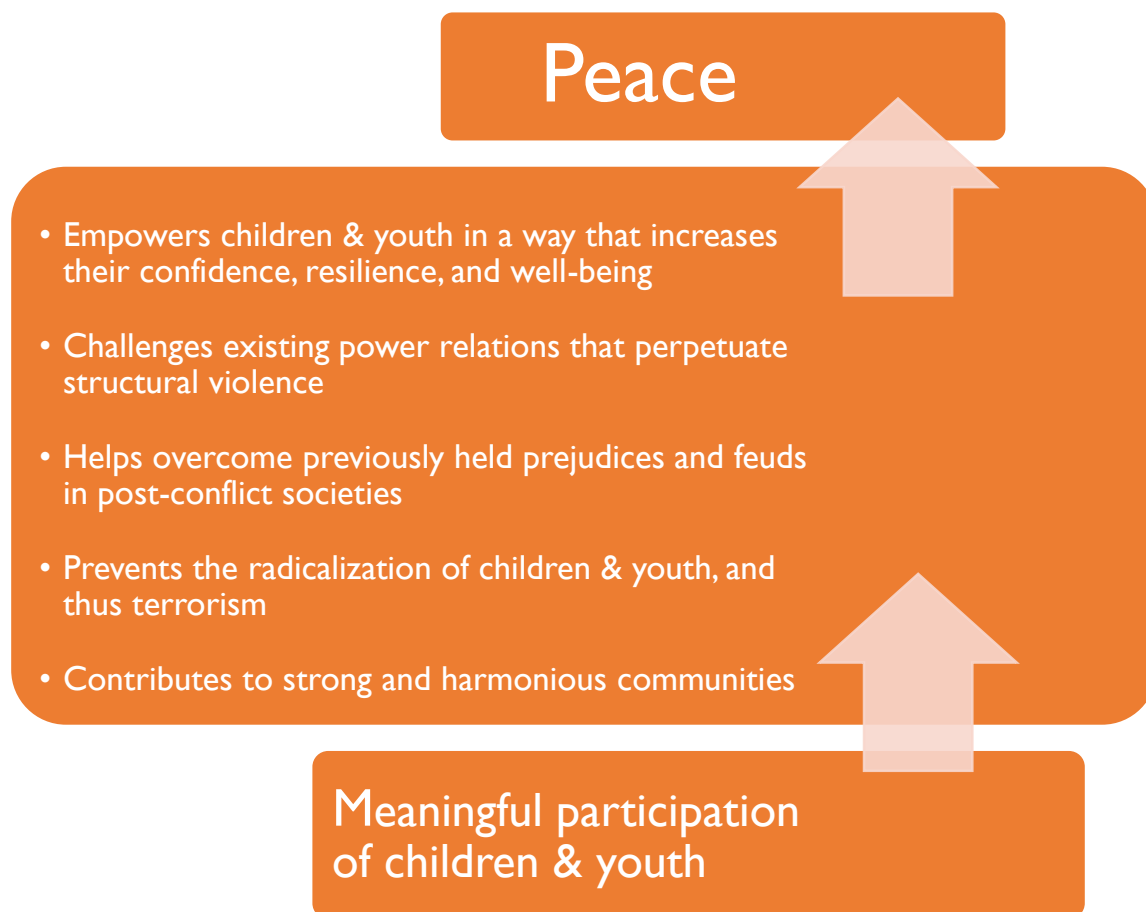


Figure 1: How meaningful participation of children and youth can lead to just peace and human security.

Meaningful participation of children and youth empowers children in a way that increases their confidence, resilience, and well-being.

If children have access to information and the opportunity to express their views, they can better protect themselves against negative influences in their lives. Being involved in discussions and decisions at home as well as in institutions, children are less vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. If children are asked about their opinions on all matters affecting them, they develop the confidence needed in order to speak out, complain, and demand change. They also develop a greater sense of self and see purpose in their actions. Especially marginalized children, who live in poverty or are exposed to armed conflict, need to develop mechanisms to cope with bad situations; participating in the community is one way of doing that (IAWGCP 2008, 6; Austin 2009, 252).

In many aspects of their lives, children remain dependent on adults. Therefore, they are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, including (sexual) violence. Although children have the right to be protected, this makes them even more dependent on those supposed to protect them. Participating meaningfully in the community allows children to become more self-reliant and thus enables children to protect themselves (Liebel 2007, 64). Furthermore, participation makes children autonomous subjects instead of objects of adult protection. Through participation, children become actors in society. This empowers children and it is important for their future well-being. Michael Freeman (2007) sums up the importance of agency: “Rights are important because those who have them can exercise agency. Agents are decision-makers. They are people who can negotiate with others, who are capable of altering relationships or decisions, who can shift social assumptions and constraints” (8).

As confident and resilient actors in society, children can promote positive change. They can transform the world into a more just and peaceful society. They can be “agents of transformation” (World Vision 2015 b, 4). Children’s individual empowerment is therefore fundamental for the positive development of a community. It may seem that children who challenge adult authority and structures create conflict in society. Indeed, participation can be uncomfortable and inconvenient at times. However, the community will grow stronger in the long run. It will be more just and inclusive, and profit from the increased well-being of their children (World Vision 2015 b, 5).

Meaningful participation of children and youth challenges existing power relations that perpetuate structural violence.

The participation of children and youth can lead to peace in the sense that it contributes to social equality. In our world, structures of inequality persist between rich and poor, the Global North and the Global South, men and women, different religious and ethnic groups, and also adults and children. Children are subject to the care and protection of adults. They are therefore in most aspects of their lives dependent on parents, relatives, teachers or social workers. This makes children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by adult authorities. Furthermore, it forces children to adapt to existing structures and rules of behavior, and adopt existing assumptions. Meaningful participation gives children more power vis à vis adults. It allows children to question existing norms and challenge existing structures of violence (Liebel 2007, 64; White 2009, 43).

Inequality does not only exist between different groups but also within seemingly homogenous groups. For instance, inequality persists between privileged and marginalized men, women, and children. Hence, children do not constitute a homogenous group. Children from different backgrounds have different experiences and different needs. It follows that power relations exist between older and younger children, stronger and weaker children as well as girls and boys (White 2009, 49). When it comes to participation, mostly privileged children enjoy the opportunity to engage in participation events (McGinley and Grieve 2009, 256-258; Liebel 2007, 67). Meaningful participation which is inclusive of all children can reduce unequal power relations and empower marginalized children (White 2009, 43).

The Amra project in Bangladesh gives street and working children the opportunity to question structures of violence created by unequal power relations, including power relations between children. The facilitators of the Amra project know that children are not outside of adult structures. They behave within existing structures and reproduce them by adopting common behavior. For instance, if a child living on the street is frequently beaten by police, it may adopt such violent behavior and beat up weaker children. In the Amra support group for working and street children, existing structures and power relations are questioned and children resolve conflicts caused by power difference peacefully (White 2009, 43).

Meaningful participation of children and youth helps overcome previously held prejudices and feuds in post-conflict societies.

Children have the potential to contribute to the reconciliation of a divided society by fostering relations with members of other ethnic or religious groups. This can be done most effectively in youth camps or similar participation initiatives. In post-conflict societies, the persistence of social prejudices and old identities prevents a society from overcoming past feuds. In designated summer programs, children engage with participants from various ethnic and religious groups and build friendships. Thereby, they replace the identity of an old enemy with the identity of a friend. Ideally, children who have made friends stay in contact with them after the summer program ends. Furthermore, children can change the attitude of the people in their environment (Ungerleider 2006). This way, children become “peacebuilders” (World Vision 2013 a).

One example program for children and youth from a post-conflict society is World Vision's Kids for Peace project in Kosovo. The program was launched in 2002, and in 2016 had 16 clubs where children can participate on a yearly basis. According to World Vision, "using dialogue, peace education, artistic expressions, advocacy, and a focus on holistic needs involving psycho-social, relational, spiritual and economic well-being, World Vision Kosovo has seen emotional healing and the foundations for peaceful living bear fruit" (World Vision 2013 a).

Meaningful participation of children and youth is also important in societies that face armed conflict. In times of conflict, child rights defenders usually focus on the protection of children. However, the inclusion of children in conflict resolution is equally important. Children can provide ideas on how to resolve a conflict peacefully through dance or drama performances, music, or simply by holding meetings in order to raise awareness (Feinstein, Giertsen, and O'Kane 2009, 56). While stakeholders increasingly promote the participation of children in resolving violent conflicts, NGOs and researchers should focus on how children can meaningfully participate in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Meaningful participation of children and youth prevents the radicalization of children & youth, and thus terrorism.

If children have the opportunity to participate in the community and thereby develop a feeling of belonging, they are less vulnerable to recruitment by radical groups. Especially the political participation of marginalized groups and individuals, along with measures aimed at reducing poverty, inequality, and discrimination, can prevent terrorism (Hörter 2009, 172). Social and cultural discontent is a major cause of the radicalization of children and youth. According to the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, terrorism is caused by young men's lack of perspective and agency (Hörter 2009, 188). In order to prevent young people from joining radical and militant groups, children and youth must be included in decisions at all levels and experience a sense of agency.

In a 2015 resolution, the United Nations urged states parties to ensure the representation of children and youth in decision-making processes at all levels in order to prevent radicalization. In resolution 2250 "on youth, peace and security" from 9 December, 2015, the UN Security Council stresses that children play an important role in peacebuilding

and the prevention of violent conflict: “Youth should actively be engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation [...] a large youth population presents a unique demographic dividend that can contribute to lasting peace and economic prosperity if inclusive policies are in place” (United Nations 2015).

Meaningful participation of children and youth contributes to strong and harmonious communities.

Participation initiatives usually seek to empower the individual child and give him or her a voice. However, the participation of children and youth does not only empower the individual child. The entire community benefits. Although meaningful participation of children and youth may challenge adult structures and cause inconvenience, it will strengthen the community in the long run. The inclusion of all members of the community reduces discontent and frustration and leads to more harmonious and healthy community life. A rights-based approach to development as supported by World Vision and many other NGOs is therefore important for the development of communities, countries, and regions (World Vision 2012, 41).

3 THE GOAL: JUST PEACE AND HUMAN SECURITY

In the previous part of this paper, I have shown that meaningful participation of children and youth can lead to peace. What does peace mean, though? I understand peace as a goal for human beings to follow in order to create a world free from physical, psychological, and structural violence, where people live in dignity, and enjoy social justice and their universal human rights. This goal can also be considered an ideal which is extremely difficult or even impossible to realize. Yet, it is an end that can offer guidance for the agenda of development organizations, national and regional governmental institutions, and the United Nations. In the following, I will further elaborate on the concepts underlying my understanding of peace, in particular the “just peace” concept and the “human security” concept.

My understanding of peace as described above is based on Johan Galtung’s peace concept (1969), as well as the German Catholic and Evangelical Protestant churches’ “just peace” concept (2000 and 2007).² These approaches have in common that they reject an older

² It is difficult to speak of one “just peace” concept as the Catholic and Evangelical Protestant churches developed it in separate efforts: the German Bishops’ report “A Just Peace” was published in 2000 and the

concept of peace as the absence of physical violence like war. Rather, peace is the absence of physical, psychological, AND structural violence or unjust social relations that perpetuate oppression, discrimination, and even physical or psychological violence.



Figure 2: A broad understanding of peace has developed in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies since 1969. The approaches above represent major steps in this development and underlie my theory of participation and peace.

According to Galtung's perspective on peace, structural violence (which is embedded in structures created by human beings) is considered preventable harm to human beings (Jahn 2012, 36ff). An example of structural violence in our global neoliberal system is the exploitation of workers in the global South by multinational corporations from the global North. The harm that is caused to dependent workers is preventable because it is human-made, and reforms of the neoliberal system may alleviate the harm. Therefore, preventable human suffering is considered a threat to peace just as much as terrorism and armed conflict (Jahn 2012, 48). Poverty can equally be considered preventable human suffering. According to many organizations, there are enough resources worldwide, yet they are shared unequally (see Oxfam, Brot für die Welt, Welthungerhilfe, as well as the UN World Food Program).

"Memorandum of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany" was released in 2007. However, both documents show similarities in their concept and operationalization of peace (Hörter 2009, 178). The concept remains vague and has not yet been developed into a theory (Strub 2011, 105).

Scholar and activist Jean Ziegler captures this notion of preventable harm by saying that “every child that dies of hunger is murdered” (translated from Schumann and Thomma 2013).

Also the German Christian churches’ ideas of just peace focus on the elimination of structural violence. The notion of social justice is central to the concept of just peace (Strub 2011, 103). In the 2007 “Memorandum of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany,” the council calls for a closure of the growing gap between rich and poor, especially the gap between the Global North and the Global South (Senghaas-Knobloch 2009, 144). In the German Bishops’ (2000) report “A Just Peace,” it says that structures of inequality need to be overcome. The document reads: “a world that does not provide the majority of people with the basic needs of a humane life is not viable” (paragraph 59; Hörter 2009, 174). Both churches also stress that economic actors have a responsibility to help realize peace (Hörter 2009, 174; Senghaas-Knobloch 2009, 145).

“Based on the notion of human dignity, all steps taken in order to realize just peace must have regard for the actual living conditions of the individual human being. Institutions and approaches must be measured against their expected outcomes of increasing security (in accordance with the concept of “human security”) so that individuals are free from fear and need, promoting the free development of individuals, recognizing cultural diversity, and thus contributing to peace-fostering and just international relations.”

Translated from the Memorandum of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, 2007, 13

In their publications, the Christian churches stress the importance of human dignity, human rights, and international law (Senghaas-Knobloch 2009, 140; Hörter 2009, 174f). Today, individuals as bearers of universal and inalienable human rights sit in the center of development approaches. Thereby, individuals around the world are influenced by and at the same time influence global structures and developments. A world where human beings live in just peace and human security is only possible if individuals – and especially children and the most vulnerable – are empowered as actors who can bring about positive change. This emphasis on

the individual's well-being as a precondition for strong communities is made in the United Nations "human security" concept.³

Human security highlights the security of individuals as opposed to the security of nations. According to the concept of human security, human beings should be free from fear and need, and enjoy their universal human rights. Thus, human beings should neither suffer from armed conflict or domestic violence, nor be denied basic human needs. They should live in "freedom and dignity" (United Nations 2016). The core meaning of the concept can be summarized in the following quote: "the survival, livelihood and dignity of people form the basis for achieving peace, development and human progress at every level – local, national, regional and international" (United Nations 2016).

The assumption behind the concept is that security, development, and human rights go hand in hand. For instance, when poverty, abuse, discrimination, and inequality decrease, so will physical violence. Key to human security is then the eradication of social inequality and structural violence as well as the promotion of human rights. Thereby, efforts to realize human security must consider our global interconnectedness and the impact that measures have on other world regions (Ulbert and Werthes 2008; United Nations 2016). The human security concept contains similar aspects and logic as the just peace concept. In general, issues of peace and security are closely linked, and the two concepts discussed above intersect and complement each other. Figure 3 combines aspects from both concepts and summarizes the understanding of peace underlying this paper.

³ The concept of human security was first established by the United Nations in its "Human Development Report" (see United Nations 1994; Ulbert and Werthes 2008, 13). The term was first used in a resolution on the "2005 World Summit Outcome" (see United Nations 2005; United Nations 2016).



Figure 3: Through the cooperation of all stakeholders, domestically and internationally, we can move towards a world where all human beings live in just peace and human security. Measures taken should empower the individual and include 1) eliminating physical, psychological, and structural violence, 2) implementing and promoting human rights, 3) implementing and promoting social justice, 4) ensuring the survival of all human beings and providing basic needs, and 5) following and strengthening the law.

4 THE MEANS: MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN & YOUTH

After having elaborated on my understanding of peace, in this part of the paper, I will discuss what “meaningful participation” entails. Children’s right to be heard and have their opinions

taken into consideration, i.e. the right to participation, is provided to all children under the age of 18 in article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).⁴ The first part of article 12 reads: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (United Nations 1989). How should that look like in practice?

Participation must be understood as a right rather than an instrument. Often, participation of children is used by adults or children as an instrument to deal with one specific issue. The goal then is to resolve an issue, not child participation as such. However, participation as a universal and inalienable child right stands for itself. It allows all children – at least in theory – to participate always, everywhere, and in all matters affecting them. When participation is seen as a right, it translates into a permanent and sustainable practice of expressing views, initiating and joining debate, engaging in relations, and influencing decisions (Jans 2004, 31; Theiß 2009, 344). Therefore, a rights-based approach is one way of realizing meaningful participation of children and youth (Liebel 2007, 66).

Unfortunately, most initiatives aimed at realizing the child’s right to participation are limited in scope, controlled by adults, and lack opportunities for children to influence decisions directly. Measures to promote children’s participation are often single one-off events and educational in character (Liebel 2006, 92). They offer participation in “artificial training rooms,” with participants selected due to their outstanding performance as students, and with agendas safe enough to prevent major conflict with adults (Jans 2004, 39; McGinley and Grieve 2009, 256-258; Liebel 2007, 67 and 185). Such participation initiatives cannot be considered meaningful participation of children and youth.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states in its “General Comment No. 12” on article 12 of the CRC: “If participation is to be effective and meaningful, it needs to be understood as a process, not as an individual one-off event” (United Nations 2009, 26). Therefore, states need to implement article 12 of the CRC in a way that allows for permanent involvement of children in debate and decisions in the community, but also at the national, regional, and international level. However, there are limits to the child’s right to participation since the child has also the right to protection. For instance, participatory processes in which

⁴ Although the word “participation” does not appear in article 12 of the UN CRC, the right to be heard is closely linked to participation (United Nations 2009, 5).

children and young people engage must be safe and prevent traumatization (Jamieson and Mukoma, 80f).

Unfortunately, the child's right to protection is often interpreted in a way that weakens the right to participation and thus prevents meaningful participation of children and youth. Since childhood is understood as a period of life that needs to be protected against negative influences, children are often discouraged from engaging with social, political, economic, and cultural challenges. However, children in all world regions are affected by domestic social, political, economic, and cultural problems as well as globalization and climate change. The childhood of many children is not free from threats, especially in poor regions of the Global South (Jans 2004, 34). Many children live in poverty; they live on the street and work; they are involved in armed conflict or suffer the consequences thereof (White 2009; Feinstein, Giertsen and O'Kane 2009). Children thus have all the reasons to participate in debate and decisions affecting their everyday lives. In General Comment No. 12, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that "all matters affecting the child" must be understood broadly (United Nations 2009, 8). Meaningful participation is only given when children and young people, especially the most vulnerable, express their side of the story and influence decisions on social, political, economic, and cultural issues. Such issues must include globalization and structural violence (Austin 2009, 245f).

Next to overprotection, a further obstacle to meaningful participation is that adults often doubt children's capacities and capabilities. It is therefore important to note that a child's ability to participate in debates and decisions is not linked to age but rather depends on a number of factors (World Vision 2015 a, 10). According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the phrase "capable of forming his or her opinion" in article 12 of the CRC is not to be understood as a limiting element. The Committee explicitly says that there is no age limit to participation. Play, body language, and facial expressions all constitute participation (United Nations 2009, 6f). Hence, participation is possible as from the age of zero. In order for adults to support the participation of children, the Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation gives an overview of participatory efforts by children in different age groups. For instance, children between months 0 and 18 can express views on "food, clothing, who they want to be with, how they are handled and what they play with" (IAWGCP 2008, 22).

Since children do not enjoy the same citizenship rights as adults, their views and participatory efforts must be taken extra seriously. When children cannot influence politics directly by voting or being elected, it is vital that they are consulted and their opinions are taken into consideration. However, most of the time, children feel that – although they have the opportunity to share their ideas – no action follows their consultation (Liebel 2007, 68f). Especially since children do not enjoy the same set of rights as adults, meaningful participation means that adults have to share power with children. Adults’ role in the participation of children and youth is central to its success. Parents, teachers, and NGO staff usually organize participation events and provide information to children; they pick children to speak at conferences or represent their school at a youth council (Feinstein, Giertsen and O’Kane 2009, 58f). Therefore, adults are responsible for creating a stimulating environment which is an essential condition for meaningful participation (World Vision 2015 a, 12).

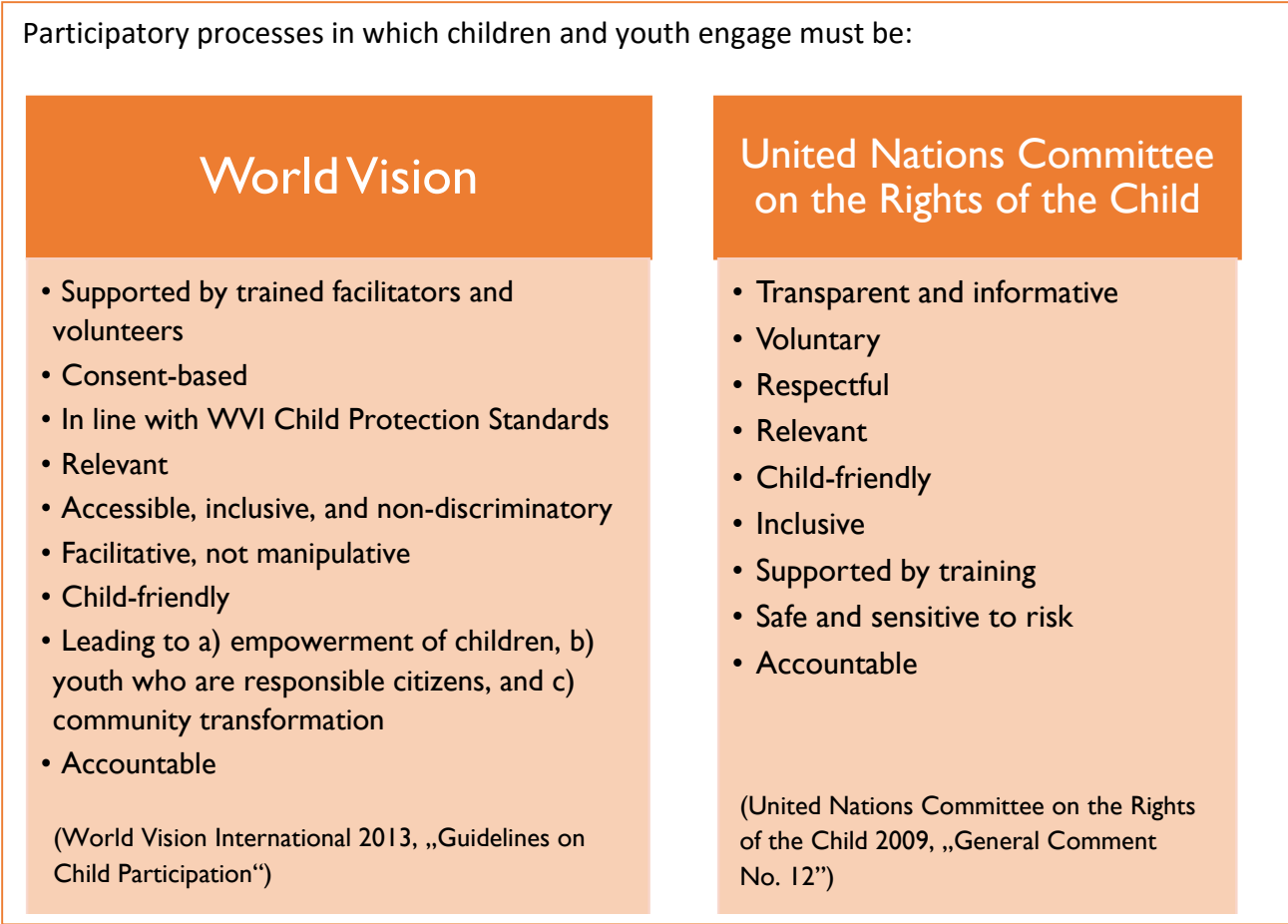


Figure 4: Criteria for meaningful participation of children and youth according to World Vision and the United Nations. Guidelines for child participation have been drafted by many international organizations and institutions. The criteria above are examples, and juxtapose NGO criteria with UN criteria.

To conclude this part of the paper, I will provide some examples of initiatives that come close to realizing meaningful participation of children and youth. In South Africa, children participated in drafting the Children's Act between 2003 and 2007. The team coordinating the "Dikwankwetla – Children in Action Project" was based at the Children's Institute of the University of Cape Town. Children who participated in the project came from all regions of South Africa and had diverse backgrounds. Their personal experiences (including abuse, neglect, and discrimination) guided the children in drafting legislation proposals. Furthermore, the children met with parliamentarians to lobby for their ideas. Although there were obstacles and shortcomings, the Dikwankwetla project gave children the opportunity to have a real impact on policies that affect them directly (Jamieson and Mukoma 2009).

Another example close to meaningful participation is children's assessment of the status of their rights in their own countries. When states submit their regular reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child about measures taken to implement the CRC, children have the opportunity to submit alternative reports. This is an important mechanism to hold governments accountable. Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark all have submitted alternative reports in 2006, drafted with the involvement of children (World Vision 2015 a). While these examples offer inspiration for meaningful participation where children can influence opinions and outcomes, they must be complemented by many other initiatives, especially in the local community, to be effective. To stress this again, it is important to see participation as a right and permanent practice.

Meaningful participation of children and youth: a right and permanent practice	
Who?	All children and young people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • especially those living in the poorest and most difficult situations • especially those who behave outside of the mainstream and are deemed “troublemakers”
What?	All issues that affect children, including global challenges such as climate change and structural violence
When?	Always (children start participating at age 0; they participate even if this causes inconveniences for adults)
Where?	At the local, national, regional, and international level
Why?	Participation empowers children, challenges existing power relations, overcomes long-held prejudices, prevents radicalization of youth, strengthens communities; can lead to just peace and human security
How?	Participation must always be voluntary. Children express their views freely and have their opinions taken into consideration (CRC article 12.1), are heard in court directly or through a representative (CRC article 12.2), seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any media of their choice (CRC article 13.1), form associations and assemble peacefully (CRC article 15.1), consume information from diverse national and international sources (CRC article 17), engage in play and cultural activities (CRC article 31) in a safe and stimulating environment

Figure 5: What does meaningful participation entail?

5. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN & YOUTH: A PRECONDITION FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

So far in this paper, I have argued that meaningful participation of children and youth is key to realizing lasting peace and justice. I have shown that the inclusion of children and youth in decisions at all levels increases their resilience and well-being, challenges existing structures

that perpetuate violence, helps reconcile divided societies, prevents radicalization, and strengthens communities. In this process, peace is more than the absence of physical violence. Just peace includes social justice, freedom from physical, psychological, and structural violence, the empowerment of individuals, and the promotion of human rights and human dignity. Participation of children and youth must be meaningful instead of selective. It must be understood as a right and permanent practice inclusive of all children and all ages at all levels and on all issues affecting children. Throughout the paper, arguments and examples have shown that the political participation of children and youth plays an important role. In the following, I will elaborate on this aspect of children's participation.

Children are autonomous subjects and actors in society. This perspective has been established and consolidated in recent decades. However, children still do not enjoy the same rights as adults. Although the CRC grants children civil rights for the first time in history, children are generally not allowed to vote or be elected (IAWGCP, 4). Therefore, children's influence on political and budget decisions is limited (Theiß 2009, 350).⁵ This makes it even more important to consult children in all political matters affecting them. Unfortunately, many children made the experience that they are heard but no action follows their consultation (Liebel 2007, 68f). Due to the lack of direct political influence, children cannot hold politicians accountable and make them live up to their promises. Voluntary consultation of children by politicians cannot be considered meaningful participation of children and youth. Children need the opportunity to influence decisions and put pressure on politicians.

One solution to children's lack of direct political influence is to see children not only as active individuals but moreover as a social group. They constitute a collective like women, people with disabilities, indigenous people, migrants, the LGBTIQ community, and other marginalized groups. Children have special interests just like women and other groups that are usually not represented by the mainstream. In its "General Comment No. 12," the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) states that children's views must not be understood as isolated but rather as expressions of a group (5). If children engage in political debate as a social group, they have more power to advance their objectives. For instance, they can campaign for their "suffrage" in order to gain more influence on political decisions – if that is what they wish (Theiß 2009, 353). It is therefore important to support lobby work for

⁵ In Western and Northern European countries, demographic developments leave children and youth with even less political influence vis à vis senior citizens. While children and youth are usually not allowed to vote until the age of 18, there is no maximum age for voting. Hence, the gap between political influence of the young and the old is growing.

children and advance their interests in the political sphere with the direct and meaningful participation of children.

If children want to participate in political debates, they have to use adult-centric structures. This may prevent children from expressing their views in a meaningful manner because the structures are unsafe or discriminatory against children. One problem is the use of difficult language in political debates which prevents children (but also many adults) from grasping the issue and voicing their opinions. Individual one-off participation events that are tailored to children's needs often do not suffice as compensation for children's lack of participation in official channels of communication. "Some well-meant initiatives, like child councils, often become training grounds for children, who, due to their lack of political rights, cannot fully participate" (Jans 2004, 31). In such initiatives, participation is treated as a means and instrument instead of a right (Jans 2004, 31). Furthermore, single participation events are mostly designed and controlled by adults who select the participants and set the agenda. Children then do not have the opportunity to truly challenge adult assumptions and structures (Liebel 2006, 92; McGinley and Grieve 2009, 256).

One solution to this problem is the support and promotion of child-led associations. "The CRC affirms children's right to form and join associations (article 15). Many children are members of cultural associations, sports clubs or social movements [...] Children-led associations can play an important role in developing social awareness, organizational skills and self-confidence of children. They also can help children to protect themselves by seeking strength in numbers and can aid them to achieve social justice" (IAWGCP 2008, 75). In child-led associations, children decide what issues they want to engage with. They chose the measures they want to take and who can join in. Child-led political activity may not be free from discrimination against other children, but it is first and foremost a product of children. Therefore, it comes closer to meaningful participation than any adult-led initiative.⁶

Child-led initiatives constitute a bottom-up model of child participation. That makes them effective and meaningful. Especially those children who have previously been excluded from participation initiatives because they were deemed troublemakers benefit from a bottom-up approach. According to Liebel (2007), some children who resist adult authority are considered "unfit for participation" (67). Yet, resisting adult authority can be seen as an act of

⁶ To be fair, many adult-led initiatives are supervised by trained professionals and take participation seriously. When children want to take action, they need financial support and advice to implement their ideas. Adults thus have a central role in enabling meaningful participation of children and youth.

participation. It is a clear message that a child does not agree with adult opinions, methods, and structures (Gerarts 2015, 104). Such messages can be conveyed by members of a child-led association, for instance by going on strike. The right to strike is frequently used by adults to protest poor working conditions. Children may borrow the right to strike from adults in order to protest their lack of influence in decisions, or simply campaign for better learning conditions in schools (Liebel 2007, 70).

Children must be allowed to challenge the power of adults. They must be allowed to question the structures in which they grow up and the norms with which they are raised to comply. Certainly, this is extremely difficult without the cooperation of adults. Since children are dependent on adults in many aspects of their lives, adults must cooperate. They should be willing to share their power and influence. Only if power relations are balanced, social justice can be achieved. Admittedly, deliberately giving up privileges seems like an unpleasant act. That is one massive obstacle to the implementation of the child's right to participation (Freeman 2007, 8). However, if adults believe that better community life results from it, many may be motivated to give it a shot. Adults working towards the realization of child rights should adopt a rights-based approach to participation. That is important to establish children's participation as a permanent practice, and thus ensure meaningful participation of children and youth.

6 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that meaningful participation of children and youth can lead to peace. For this argument, I have drawn on the concept of "just peace," developed by German Christian churches, and the United Nations' concept of "human security." In my understanding, peace is a goal (or ideal) for human beings to follow in order to create a world free from physical, psychological, and structural violence, where people live in dignity, and enjoy social justice and their universal human rights. Thereby, the focus lies on the individual's well-being, that he or she is free from fear and need, and lives in human dignity. One important aspect of this understanding of peace and security in contrast to other concepts is the significance of social justice, equality, and the elimination of structural violence.

I have shown that participation can increase children's confidence, resilience, and well-being, challenge structures that perpetuate inequality and violence, help reconcile a divided society, prevent radicalization and thus terrorism, and strengthen communities. Participation

of children and youth must be meaningful. Educational participation events designed and controlled by adults do not constitute meaningful participation. Instead, participation must be understood as a right and permanent practice. It must be inclusive of all children at all ages, admitting all issues affecting children even if this causes inconvenience, and conducted in a safe and stimulating environment.

Although children are granted civil rights as documented in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children lack direct influence on politics and policies. They are usually not allowed to vote or be elected. The political participation of children and youth is therefore limited. Solutions to this problem include lobby work for children's interests as well as child-led political activity. Children should be regarded as a social group whose members need a seat at the table as much as members of other social groups like women, people with disabilities, migrants or LGBTIQ people. Children should be supported in forming and joining child-led initiatives which may use "radical" measures such as adult's right to strike to campaign for their interests.

Key to promoting and implementing children's right to participation is to see children as subjects and actors in society, a distinct identity group, and to recognize their transformative power. Children can create positive change if they are included in decision-making processes at all levels. However, that is only possible if adults share power with children, and if children are free to challenge existing structures and norms. It may be time for adults to let them. If we want peace and justice for all – and not just for a minority of privileged identities –, we need to be open to the meaningful participation of children and youth. A rights-based approach as adopted by World Vision and many development NGOs can help take a step towards this goal.

Finally, research with children is vital to make heard and understand children's views. Meaningful participation of children and youth also means participation in research. This paper provided an adult perspective on child participation and peace. Further papers relating to participation and peace should include children's perspectives. While I believe that peace and social justice can only be achieved if children and youth participate meaningfully in society and get their fair share of power and influence, it ultimately comes down to whether children want this. The best way to find out is to speak with children!

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