

Case study on child participation in Moldova

Context

Participation of children in decision-making is a relatively new concept in the Republic of Moldova, having been explored mainly at the level of the central public authority, especially at the initiative and with the support of the civil society organisations. The creation – for a short period though – of a parliamentary group of children in 2000, and periodical involvement of children in 2009 in the monitoring of the implementation of the UN Convention of the Rights of Children, have been among few positive practices in this area developed by the country.

In 2010, when USAID project started, the concept of child's participation in decision-making was almost totally neglected at the local level. The decision-makers and politicians didn't have a culture of consulting meaningfully children and young people in matters that affected their lives. So, children were not involved in strategic planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of local policies, programmes and services addressed to children and their families. This attitude was due to traditional approaches to child and adults participation, where children were usually viewed as beneficiaries, as objects of intervention, rather than as co-participants in the processes or subjects of actions. In our country adults still tend to believe that they know better what children need and want in life, and this is why these adults produce policies and programs without consulting children. Moreover, children are not involved in the implementation of these policies and programs, in monitoring and evaluation of their effects.

The experience of P4EC/EveryChild developed in this area in the past few years is appreciated at the level of local public authorities where new child participation programs were launched and implemented, and at the country level too, which gives possibility for broader replication of this experience in Moldova.

How did we begin?

The first activity we organized was within a planning workshop we had with decision makers from the raions where we intended to work, because we consider that child participation is an issue that doesn't concern only children. Adults play a decisive role in ensuring meaningful participation of children, by taking their opinions in the most serious way. At that workshop, the issue of child participation at various administrative levels, the value of child participation, levels of child participation, and other important subjects ensuring meaningful child participation were touched upon.

Also at that event, the decision-makers had an opportunity to assess child participation in their raions by using a self-assessment tool that allowed determining the level of child participation in social processes in each of the raions. This method covered a series of statements grouped in six various areas: children and the organization, policies and procedures, prevention of child abuse, implementation and training, awareness raising and communication, monitoring and review. The results of this exercises showed that all three pilot sites lacked clear child protection and participation policies, as well as clear procedures to ensure child's safety, monitor and review child protection measures.

The project team and its implementing partners agreed to produce a Concept of child participation in children and family services at local level, along with a Child Protection Policy to guide all professionals involved in the work with children at local level.

Besides, the workshop participants agreed to create local Advisory Boards of Children, as a group of active children and young people coming from different social environments, with different care experiences, who know the problems of their peers and who will work to ensure that children's voices are heard by adults.

What inspired us?

Our study visits in 2010 – 2012, organized with the support of the EveryChild UK for decision makers and professionals inspired us. During the exchange visits we had the opportunity to analyse a number of interesting

experiences of involving children and young people both in managing their own cases, and in the development of new services and programs. The study tour participants have been mostly inspired by the meeting with Dr. Roger Morgan, Director of Children's Rights, OFSTED, who talked to us about his work in upholding children's rights in the care system, ways of representing children's views, ensuring children have a say in the choice of placement, as well as means of redress and challenge.

The meeting with Dr. Roger Morgan confirmed for us some basic principles in child participation work:

1. All materials (documents) should be developed in such way that they are accessible both to ministers and children!
2. National minimum standards for services demand that the child's opinion is heard and considered at the moment of development of a child-focused social service;
3. Child consultation occurs at all levels:
 - At the development of the development of the Individual Care Plan, its monitoring and review;
 - At the development of policies and their implementation;
 - At the revision of the child protection system as a whole;
 - At the service level - consultation of children who went through the care system could considerably improve the quality of the care for children.

After these visits, the project team felt strongly and decided to try empowering children and young people with state care experiences, to monitor and evaluate child care services, and to contribute with their proposals for the improvement of social services addressed to local authorities that are legally responsible for the development of services in line with the needs of children, youth, families, and communities. Advisory Boards of Children were identified as important elements in this process.

How were the Advisory Boards of Children created?

The process of recruiting the ABC members was designed and implemented in several stages, in partnership between the project team and local partners.

At the first stage, announcements about the recruitment of children for ABCs were published in local newspapers. To ensure that the information reached all children, this announcement was also distributed among all community and residential schools from the project sites. Participation was open to any girl or boy between 12 and 17, regardless of nationality, native language, religion, or disability, from village or town, with or without residential or other care experience (foster care, family-type home, guardianship), with the migrant parents, with experience of participation in various projects in the school or community and who would like to contribute to fulfilling the rights of the child in their community. The applicants were required to submit a portfolio containing the following: CV, indicating the address, contact phone, and description of participation experience (maximum 1 page); written consent of the parents or care-givers; a letter of motivation where they had to explain why they wanted to become members of the Advisory Board of Children; a reference letter from a group of peers (at least 10 signatures); an essay about child's rights fulfillment in their original communities (maximum 1 page). The portfolios of children were collected by the Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorates in each project site.

During the second stage, discussions in focus groups were held with children. These discussions were focused around children's rights, their fulfillment, and the involvement of the children in decision-making in matters concerning them. At these discussions, representatives of Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorates and Education Directorates participated. In mutual agreement, ABC members were selected. The groups were made of at most 20 children in each raion.

The third step in the ABC creation was the recruitment of the local coordinator to be in-charge with child participation activities in each project site. The coordinator was selected within an open competition. The person was required to demonstrate a good knowledge of child participation, respectful attitude towards children, young people and their families, willingness to develop innovative practices, challenging societal attitudes and stereotypes.

How did ABC start its activity?

For the smooth and efficient activity of the ABC, it was necessary to train the members, ensuring that their voices are strong enough in order to be heard by adults. We have realized that in order to ensure that adults take children seriously, the information communicated by children and young people to adults should be supported by good arguments, concrete facts and data.

The goal of the first workshops was to empower children and young people to act as ABC members. The children were trained in 5 stages, 3 days each, where the following issues were discussed: the role and competences of the ABC; UN Convention on the Rights of Children; monitoring and evaluation of the rights of children; lobby and advocacy strategies; social services concepts; monitoring and evaluation of the situation of a child placed into social service; child abuse, neglect and exploitation; Child's Helpline as a service addressed to children and families experiencing difficulties in their lives.

With the support of adult coordinators, ABC members took over the following responsibilities: to study the problems faced by children and young people in the family, school, community; to make the children's opinions about the best ways of solving their problems heard; to negotiate with the decision-makers on the development of new programs and services for children at local and national level; to raise public awareness about the way child's rights are met.

What were the activities undertaken by ABCs involved?

Development of the ABC activity framework and promotional materials

The first activity undertaken by the ABCs was the development of the ABCs Regulations; this was necessary in order to ensure efficient organization of the ABC activity by children and ABCs' coordinators. The Regulations stipulate the principles of the Board's activity, rights and duties of the members, procedure of calling the Board meetings, responsibilities and rights of the adult coordinator.

The Regulations were developed by the ABC members, and consulted with representatives of the Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorates and Education Directorates and proposed for approval at the Raion Council meeting. The Regulations' approval was essential in ensuring sustainability and on-going activity in child participation after the project end. Thus, the local authorities subscribe to providing salary to the child participation coordinator, who is the key person in the organization of activities with children at the local level, and an important link between adults (professionals, decision-makers) and children.

The children also decided to produce ABC promotional materials. Thus, leaflets were produced and distributed in all community schools, residential institutions, community centers, placement centers in the raions participating in the project, in order to inform the children about the ABC activity and to encourage them to discuss problems faced by children in various environments: family, school, community, etc.

Development of the Child Participation Concept and Child Protection Policies

The Child Participation Concept was the first official document developed by the representatives of the three local authorities. It highlights the following aspects: the need and importance of involving children into decision-making processes; creation of a group of children at the local level (ABCs) that would help

adults to better understand the children's needs, thus contributing to the development of new services that would meet them; specific ways of involving children, and the intended impacts of their participation (educational, social, psychological, economic impacts). This document was the starting point in the child participation activity; a document referred to every time when it was necessary to remind the local authorities that it is something they produced and it involves certain accountability.

The Child Protection Policy was developed and consulted with children, local decision-makers and professionals. The document stipulates the principles and values local authorities and professionals should follow to ensure child protection, regardless of whether the child is in a family or in any form of alternative care. The Policy includes conditions of recruitment and training of professionals in the system, of informing parents and guardians, actions recommended to be carried out in case of inadequate or disruptive behavior of parents and in case of child assault or child abuse.

While developing these documents, attention was paid to making them accessible and easy to be understood both by adults and children, so that to be implemented.

Development of the Child's Guide (the International Guidelines on Alternative Care of Children)

A big challenge for us was the involvement of children in putting the International Guidelines on Alternative care of children in a child-friendly language.

During the development of the document children were involved as much as possible throughout the process. The development process was organized in a number of stages. The first stage was to determine the guidelines structure, the second was to agree the text with the children and the last stage was to make the drawings and draw up stories based on the text. Children proposed to make a guide in a simple, clear and child-friendly language, to be used by all people of all ages: children, adolescents, adults, grandparents. They also made some suggestions: they highlighted the unclear words (service provider, carer, placement, monitoring, evaluation, etc.) and suggested explaining them in footnotes on each page, not at the end of the guidelines; they insisted to present specific stories of their peers to make the content more explicit; to give contact information children can refer to in case of need at the end of the guidelines; to highlight the rights of children in care.

Children made drawings on the basis of the text. All drawings in the guidelines belong to children. Another suggestion of children was to translate and print the guidelines in Russian language. The guide was distributed to all children from pilot raions, living and studying in different environments.

Participation of children at the meetings of the Raion Child Protection Councils and Gate-Keeping Commissions

The raion decision makers agreed for children to participate in meetings of important for children decision-making structures.

The ABC members participate in the sittings of the Council for Child Rights Protection, a structure that adopts strategic decisions for children at the district level. They also participate at the meeting of the gate-keeping commissions that look into cases of children that are proposed for alternative care.

Children said that this is an interesting experience for them. They were passive at the first sittings, but with time they became more active, are asked their opinions on the discussed subjects and are listened to. Adults started to value the children's opinions and take them seriously.

The local child participation coordinators keep records of all sittings in a form that contains the following: date of the sitting, children who participated, subjects, children's inputs and the observations of the child participation coordinator, data that is used for the meetings with children in order to improve their performance, but also to keep adults accountable for the decisions they make.

The instructions on the participation of children in the meetings of the Child Rights Protection Council and of the Gate-keeping Commission were developed with a view to prepare children for efficient participation and to protect children from eventual traumas caused by the sensitive issues discussed at the meetings with adults. These recommendations contain instructions on the preparation of children for the meeting, their participation during the meeting and things to be discussed after the meeting.

Involvement of children in monitoring and evaluation of social services for children

The involvement of children in the process of monitoring and evaluation of social services was another big challenge for us. The adults were keen to see the results of this activity and the children were keen to monitor the fulfillment of children's rights in care services.

For the beginning it was decided to start the monitoring and evaluation of the situation of children placed in foster care. The children in ABCs were trained and prepared to monitor the service. Prior to that they participated in numerous activities, where they had an opportunity to learn facts related to foster care provision.

First of all, they had initial meetings with officials of the Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorates, in charge with the Foster Care Service, where they were informed about the principles of organization and functioning of the foster care service.

The next step in the preparation process of children was a practical workshop on monitoring and evaluation principles and methods, which finalized with the development of the interview guide for children placed in Foster Care. The guide developed by ABC members was consulted also with the foster care teams. The children were asked to make pairs (one interviewer and one note-taker) that will undertake home visits and have discussions with children and foster carers. At the end of home visits, together with the adult coordinator, the children wrote the monitoring and evaluation report that was later presented to the SAFPD representatives. The report contained a variety of statements, conclusions, and recommendations referring to the foster care service provision for children without parental care. These conclusions and recommendations have been used by the decision-makers and professionals in charge with this service, as strong arguments in order to agree on actions aimed to improve the service. Among the suggestions the children made there were the following: that both spouses, not just one of them, should participate in the training of the foster care applicants; depending on the child's age, they should be timely informed about the details of their placement in foster care, about the causes of the placement, its duration and what is going to happen after the placement ends; during the matching period, a special area should be provided in the SAFPD office, with toys and other materials, depending on the child's age, where the child and foster could spend time to get to know each other better.

It has to be mentioned that in one case the children's recommendations were used as an additional argument for the authorities to withdraw the license of a foster carer who didn't meet professional requirements and where children reported emotional (verbal) abuse.

It was decided that the following service to be looked at by the ABC was the Family Type Children's Homes, as this service has similar principles of organization and functioning as in Foster Care, but where a bigger number of children is placed there.

Child participation in the national consultations for the development of the National Child and Family Protection Strategy

The Republic of Moldova is currently developing a Child and Family Protection Strategy for 2013 – 2020. This is a policy document aiming to develop and increase efficiency of the work in relation to children and families at risk. It is the first experience at the country level, when children are involved in the development of such a strategy. In order to present their own and their colleagues' ideas about the

priorities to be included in the National Child and Family Protection Strategy, the children developed arguments and set 5 priorities: Social and educational inclusion of all children, including those with special needs and ethnic minorities; consolidation of a child protecting environment in a family setting; prevention and protection of social risks of children who remain home alone (as a result of economic migration); prevention of abuse against children and protection of children – victims of abuse and neglect; elimination of labor exploitation of children. They were submitted to the Government's expert group in charge with the Strategy development.

Child participation in such workshops offers an opportunity to children, to put into discussion real problems faced by their peers in everyday life. Besides, this contributed to the creation of a comprehensive and holistic vision on the child protection system and areas that need to be addresses in the future.

Child participation in the dissemination of information about child abuse and promotion of the Child's Helpline

One of the training modules of the ABC members was the prevention of abuse of children and the Child's Helpline Service aimed at early identification and intervention in cases of abuse. Resulting from this training, the ABC members became the main actors in distributing the information among other children, with regard to the phenomenon of abuse (types of abuse, signs of abuse, and institutions in charge with child protection). These children were also the main messengers in the promotion of the Child's Helpline service. According to the data collected and analyzed in the pilot raions on the Child's Helpline, it was found that as a result of children's involvement in these activities, the number of children calling the Child's Helpline increased, and they also expressed more trust in this service. Generally, the information brought to children by children is accepted easier, they talk from equal positions, use the language accepted by their age groups. It should be mentioned that the class head-teachers also collaborate with the ABC members and involve them in the organization of various extra-school activities.

Child participation in national conferences

The children had a possibility to participate in two National Conferences held to promote foster care at the national level. Decision-makers, professionals, foster carers from across the country, discussed issues of Foster Care service development and strengthening. In parallel with the adult's Conference, 35 children in foster care and 10 members of Advisory Boards of Children from Calarasi, Falesti, and Ungheni participated at the Conference. During one day the children talked about positive aspects of the service, about the most difficult problems they face in foster families and what needs to be improved. At the end of the event they came up with a number of suggestions for the service improvement that were presented to the decision-makers, professionals and foster carers. The suggestions included: to follow the procedures of child's placement into the service, to inform the children about the exact reason of their placement, term of placement, what will happen to them after; to increase salaries of foster carers, payments for the child's support, because their needs are big and expenses much exceed the amount they are given; to involve foster children more actively in trainings, conferences, to be given opportunity to express their views, actively participate in community life; the society should be informed about children in difficulty, more fostering families should be recruited, to give warmth and love to life-beaten children.

Participation of children in such events, their recommendations for the improvement of services for children, increases credibility among those who should take attitude and make changes. There is no precedent in Moldova, when children came up in front of decision-makers, professionals to talk to them

about the difficulties encountered in the services that they are provided with and suggest possible solutions for improving the quality of care.

Lessons learned

Children's and young people's participation in our country, at least in present, depends very much on adults, and this is why much work needs to be done especially with the adults – teachers, parents, local authorities' representatives – to help them to understand and believe in the benefit of children's participation, and encourage them to create conditions for such participation.

Any intended activity needs to be planned, consulted with decision-makers and professionals in-charge, but also with the children themselves. In order to have maximum efficiency an agreement between all involved actors needs to be achieved in the preparation period.

Despite the adults' stereotypes concerning children (that they are too small to have an opinion, that they don't have life experience, that they see things only in white and black), it should be mentioned that they analyze things that concern them in a very profound manner, and they have good ideas about their involvement in decision-making.

It is good that ABC is representative, in terms of the children's age, ethnicity, social categories, place they live. This makes it possible to represent the opinions of all children.

At the same time, it should be noted that the Board's activity is not focused on providing consultation and rehabilitation to children (family trauma, residential care experience), but on the promotion of the children's rights. So, while selecting children, attention is paid to both the child's previous experience – making sure that the group is as representative, as possible, and to their communication skills, to the ways they can come up with arguments supporting their ideas, to the deepness with which they understand things.

Children and young people can participate in decision-making or can be consulted about things that affect them directly, and can give a perspective that may differ from that of adult persons. It is very important that they feel and see that things they come up with are achieved and implemented, that they find the ideas they suggest in documents, in all acts that are produced. Children from the very beginning should be considered as resources/experts in the area, they should be treated with respect, and they should feel this.

In-depth training of children is very important, because they are involved in the dissemination of the information among their peers, among children from community schools. They should be well-informed and trained for their involvement, and they should be encouraged to participate.

It is very useful that time is allocated after each training, making it possible to the children to discuss individually, if they need, with the trainer, with the person in charge with child participation. This provides them more security, confidence in their own forces, making them feel they can cope with the promotion of the rights of their peers, disseminate the information, share it with their parents, teachers.

It is useful to hold joint quarterly activity planning meetings. Along with the activities included into the project plan, the children come up with other suggestions about their participation (for example, they expressed readiness to mobilize children during various holidays, organizing charity activities for those in difficulty, flash-mobs, etc.).

While developing the training curriculum for the ABC members, attention was paid to the results of the focus groups held at the stage of the children's recruitment. Thus, the identification of the training

needs helped us to effectively organize the training and capacity building in the children's involvement/participation.

At the stage of the children's involvement into monitoring and evaluation of the social services, it is essential that they know the principles of organization and functioning of these services (and it should be done every time when monitoring and evaluation of a service starts).

While children submit monitoring reports to decision-makers and professionals, it gives them a sense that they are doing something useful, that they can change and improve social services for children. At the same time, the service providers and decision makers also changed their attitude to the children's involvement. If at the beginning they were skeptical about the children's involvement, then gradually they started to feel the value of child participation, and to respect what they do. It is encouraging that the service providers "order" M&E, i.e., ask children to perform monitoring and evaluation, because they have convinced that the children are sincere in what they do, and their recommendations and conclusions differ from those of adults.

The experience gained in child participation in the pilot areas could be usefully replicated in other raions, at the country level. In order to give credibility to it, it is good to use professionals and decision-makers from this raion as promoters, because they already felt the benefit of the children's involvement and active participation in the local decision-making process. Besides, experience exchange between ABC members would also be good. Perspective of the children's involvement will be based on priorities while monitoring and evaluating the situation of the children in various social services, such as day-care centers for children with disabilities and placement centers for children.

Another important aspect is the children's involvement in the identification of the needs for child-oriented social services in the communities where ABC members come from.

It is important to keep in mind that once children reach school-leaving age, they also leave ABC, and it is necessary to prepare other members who will succeed to this activity. This can be done by the local child participation coordinator, but also by current ABC members who participated in all trainings and are skilled to transfer the information to other applicants.