



## Eurochild background paper: Children's participation

*This paper aims to give a short background to one of the core principles of the UNCRC and how this is being implemented in practice within the Eurochild network. The right to express their own views and to be heard (Article 12) is one of the most challenging articles of the UNCRC, but it is fundamental to the implementation of all the other articles within the Convention. As a network, Eurochild is based on the UNCRC and campaigns for implementation of the UNCRC within Europe. This paper aims to give some concrete examples of how our members work with the UNCRC in their daily work.*

*The paper starts with a general overview of what we understand by children's participation (p1-2), followed by examples of how Eurochild involves children in its work (p2-4). It is followed by five examples of different forms of children's participation from the Eurochild network (p5-16).*

### Overview

*"State 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." (art. 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).*

According to the UNCRC, children and young people should participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Article 12 insists that children's views are given weight and should affect the decisions made about them. Efforts are needed to reach and to involve those children who are socially excluded. This is why Eurochild will focus on the following key concern: that the European Union pays special attention to the participation of children, especially of the most excluded ones, in the EU political and democratic life, in order to give all European children an opportunity to become fully-fledged European citizens.

The idea of children's participation is widely supported and promoted by all organizations working with child rights. International Save the Children Alliance stresses: "*Children and young people often represent over 40 percent of the societies in which they live, yet they have traditionally been excluded from decision-making all over the world. Children have the right to freedom of expression, to form and join associations and to seek and receive appropriate information. These rights should empower children to bring about changes in their own lives, to build a better future...*" Full realisation of this principle has the following positive outcomes:

- public policies on children's issues are more effective when children are involved in the decision-making process;

- children can shape their own future rather than simply being beneficiaries of adult intervention;
- young people who have learned how to influence decision-makers will be more confident as adults and may use these skills to improve their societies in the future (See: [http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/about\\_us/partic.html](http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/about_us/partic.html)).

The meaning of Article 12, the child's right to be heard has always been actively disputed, and, indeed, its content is not self-evident, but requires flexible approach. G. Lansdown, the specialist of the UNICEF *Innocenti* Research Centre, writes: *'It is important to understand clearly what Article 12 does and does not say. It does not give children the right to autonomy. It does not give children the right to control over all decisions irrespective of their implications either for themselves or others. It does not give children the right to override the rights of their parents. However, it does introduce a radical and profound challenge to traditional attitudes, which assume that children should be seen and not heard'*. (G., Lansdown, *Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making*, UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre, 2001, p. 8).

According to P. Kirby et. al., *'this does not mean that children and young people make decisions autonomously but rather that adults involve children and young people in decision-making processes in ways appropriate to their ability and level of understanding... In recognising participation rights, adults must take on a role different from simply being protectors and providers. This requires working with children and young people rather than working for them; understanding that accepting responsibility for someone does not mean taking responsibility away from them. It is the shift that some adults find uncomfortable, but it is necessary if the participation rights of children are to be realised'*. (Kirby & Lanyon & Cronin, *Building a Culture of Participation: Involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation*, Department for Education & Skills, NCB, 2003, pp. 25-26).

Basic ways of involving children could be broadly grouped into three categories, although these are far from being mutually exclusive and the boundaries are rarely clear cut. They are introduced here primarily to help conceptualising the type of work being described:

- Consultative processes – in which adults initiate processes to obtain information from children through which they can improve legislation, policies or services;
- Participative initiatives – where the aim is to strengthen processes of democracy, create opportunities for children to understand and apply democratic principles or involve children in the development of services and policies that impact on them;
- Promoting self advocacy – where the aim is to empower children to identify and fulfil their own goals and initiatives. (See: G., Lansdown, 2001, p. 22).

In all of these components the effect is the biggest if children and young people are empowered, have fun and feel valued - that is when they really participate. This needs to be backed by effective communication, real influence, feedback and evaluation. (Funky Dragon, <http://www.funkydragon.org/>).

The purpose of participation is to ensure better outcomes for children themselves and also for the wider community. The involvement of children and young people is only likely to be meaningful to them if they can see that their views have been taken into account and have made a difference. So effective participation is likely to mean that the involvement of children actually leads to some change (where they identify that the change is needed).

**A short selection of resources**

OHCHR, Committee on the rights of the child, <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

Kirby, P. & Lanyon, C. & Cronin, K. & Sinclair, R. (2003) Building a Culture of Participation: Involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation. Department for Education & Skills, NCB.

<http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/participation/buildingaculture/>

Lansdown, G. (2001) Promoting children's participation in democratic decision making. UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund, Innocenti Research Centre, Italy, Florence. [www.unicef-icdc.org](http://www.unicef-icdc.org)

Funky Dragon [www.funkydragon.org.uk](http://www.funkydragon.org.uk)

Participation Works [www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)

International Save the Children Alliance/ [www.savethechildren.net/alliance/about\\_us/partic.html](http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/about_us/partic.html)

## Children's participation in the Eurochild network

Eurochild supports the direct involvement and participation of children and young people, recognition of children as rights' holders. The views and expectations of children and young people must be considered as an expression of their own right, rather than interpreted and perceived through adults. This is particularly crucial for children at risk of social exclusion, who are among the least likely to have their voices heard. Participation is not only a necessary tool to ensure effective policy-making, it is also a mean of empowering children and young people and strengthening equal opportunities.

In order to increase children participation and to make their voices heard by the decision makers on a European level, Eurochild has organised two receptions in the European Parliament (EP), during which young people from several different European countries presented their views to Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and other present stakeholders.

On 2 March 2005 Eurochild organised its first EP Reception under the title "*Do you hear me?*", during which 12 socially disadvantaged young people from 5 European countries (Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Finland and the UK) presented their views on living in poverty and social exclusion to the invited MEPs.

On 7 June 2006, in advance of the publication of the Communication on the Rights of the Child, which has been published by the European Commission on 4 July 2006, Eurochild organised another reception in the EP, with the title "*Why involve us?*". On this occasion, a group of 16 children and young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion from 6 European countries (Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Latvia, Portugal and the UK) presented their experiences of participating in decision-making at a local or national level, as well as their demands and arguments as to their involvement in all processes concerning them - as stated in Article 12 of the UN CRC. The event was attended by some representatives of the European Institutions, national representations in Brussels, NGOs and others.



*Host MEP Lizzy Gröner together with children and young people from across Europe.*

On this occasion, the children and young people drafted a “Manifesto”, explaining the reasons why they think they should be involved.....

*“We can make a difference and we want to make a difference”*

*“Being active means to feel useful and recognized, especially for children who come from difficult situations.*

And the advantages for society

*“We can support and give a better understanding of children’s rights as we are experts in young people’s issues and we know the problems that they have”*

*“By sharing our experiences, we can help to prevent other children from experiencing similar problems”*



*Children express their views on why participation is important*

As well as the conditions needed for them to participate:

*“Inclusive- make sure everyone can take part: persons with disabilities, persons talking different languages, persons from different cultures, persons who cannot afford to pay for transports, the meetings and events should be organised during the weekends or after school”*

*“Young people friendly: the literature should be adapted to children and staff of the structures ready to welcome children”*

*“Involving all schools: it is important not to separate social work from education”*

*“Receiving enough funding to do this work properly and have enough staff”.*

Eurochild hopes that these events have contributed to increasing the visibility of child poverty and social exclusion of children and young people, and the role that children can play in the policy-making process.

## Examples from the Eurochild network

### 1 Funky Dragon, Wales, United Kingdom



*Funky Dragon* - the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales - is a peer-led organisation. It aims to give 0 – 25 year olds an opportunity to get their views heard on issues that affect them, particularly within the Welsh Assembly Government, and to facilitate the participation of children and young people in decision-making at national level.

Funky Dragon aims to represent as wide range of children and young people as possible. Its Grand Council is made up of a total of 100 young people from across Wales, representing the views of a wide range of both voluntary and statutory organisations, which feeds the views and opinions of children and young people into the Welsh Assembly and other participatory organisations.

#### **How does Funky Dragon work & how is it inclusive?**

Funky Dragon is made up of representatives from local authority-wide forums. Each Local Authority Wide Forum has 3 available spaces (one for the statutory sector, one for the voluntary sector and one for a school council representative) in the Grand Council. Each forum has to democratically elect their representatives, who are asked to commit to a 2 year term with the Grand Council.

Aside from representatives of the Local Authority Wide Forum, there are also 'Specific Interest Places', 'Co-option Places' and 'Ambassadors' in the Grand Council. The young people themselves chose eight issue areas in which they feel need specific representation. These were:

- 1) Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-gendered or questioning
- 2) Disabled young people
- 3) Young carers
- 4) Looked after young people
- 5) Minority ethnic
- 6) Have been homeless
- 7) Have been in the youth justice system
- 8) Long term health problems

For each of these areas, Funky Dragon recruits representatives through existing organisations or networks, such as 'Voices from Care' or the 'Black Youth Network'. These representatives have an important role in ensuring the young people's issues from a particular interest group are addressed within Funky Dragon and they are supported by the Specific Interest Development Worker.

The Management Committee of Funky Dragon is made up of 12 "trustees" – eight of whom are elected at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) by the Grand Council members.

They should include four young people under 18 and four over 18. The other four trustees are adults appointed by Children in Wales, the Wales Youth Agency, and two co-opted by the trustees. Funky Dragon is also the first charity in the UK to have trustees under the age of 18, setting the way forward for real participation and inclusion.

### **How does Funky Dragon influence and feed into policy making?**

Funky Dragon is composed of Sub-Groups working on particular issues that correspond to a member of the Welsh Assembly. Each Sub-Group has two Co-Chairs who are responsible for taking forward the ideas discussed throughout the year at Grand Council residentials and the AGM.

The Funky Dragon AGM takes place once a year and this is where the Grand Council and young people from across Wales are able to come together and discuss their views/opinions and then question Assembly Ministers during Question Time. The Grand Council members meet Ministers and Officials to discuss how young people from all over Wales can affect changes at a national level.

Every year the Grand Council representatives get the chance to meet again with Assembly Ministers to question them on issues that are affecting young people across Wales. During the meetings, the young people are able to catch up on what the Ministers have been doing since the previous AGM, follow up on any issues raised in previous meetings and use the time to get to know the Ministers better. The Co-Chairs receive the opportunity to 'shadow' Ministers for the day and get the experience of what it is like to be an Assembly Minister.

In Wales there is an excellent opportunity to make Article 12 of the UN CRC a reality. Most counties now have a youth forum and it is Funky Dragon's job to work along side these and ensure that the views expressed by the young people involved are passed on to those who have the power to make changes.

Funky Dragon is currently working hard to make sure that UNCRC is a reality throughout Wales in the shape of 'Our Rights, Our Story'. In a global first, Funky Dragon will be reporting to the United Nations with an independent report looking at how young people in Wales are claiming their rights. Young people have been involved from the start – from deciding what the project would look at, to the name and interviewing staff for this job. This project will highlight how young people are involved in this process to a greater extent than ever before.



*Team building is a key principle of Funky Dragon*

### **Consultation Examples by Funky Dragon**

#### Are you listening?

This consultation about what disabled children and young people in Wales think about the service they use was commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government in September 2003. It elicited the views of disabled children and young people across Wales about the services they use and their recommendations for change. The findings will be used to inform the Children's First objectives, the National Service Framework for Children and wider policy developments. A literature review was carried out prior to the consultation process which influenced the approach taken and questions asked. Disabled children and young people were involved throughout the project: in leaflet and poster design, the development of consultation materials and in the creation of a children and young

people's version of the report. A variety of 'traditional' and creative methods were used during the consultation including one to one and group interviews, express cards, ranking exercises and draw and write methods.

105 disabled children and young people, between the ages of 5-25, were consulted. A significant number of children and young people had multiple disabilities and complex needs. The sample included children and young people with: autism, cerebral palsy, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities and difficulties, Down's syndrome, mobility and access difficulties, sensory disabilities (primarily speech and hearing impairments), mental health difficulties and chronic illness.

Disabled children and young people's involvement in making decisions about their own care and treatment is not consistent across services. Whilst disabled children and young people may make small day-to-day decisions, adults still appear to make the more important decisions on their behalf. There are few examples of disabled children and young people's involvement in shaping services. However, the message is loud and clear, disabled children and young people want to participate in decisions about their individual care and the services they use.

**For further information:** [www.funkydragon.org.uk](http://www.funkydragon.org.uk)

## **2/ National Children's Bureau (NCB), England**

NCB promotes the voices, interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives. As an umbrella body for the children's sector in England and Northern Ireland, NCB provides essential information on policy, research and best practice for their members and other partners. The Participation Unit facilitates the involvement of children and young people in NCB projects and in the running of NCB itself via its support of young people on the NCB's board of management. It also assists external agencies in involving children and young people in their work. The unit is a founding partner of Participation Works (<http://www.participationworks.org.uk/>), the online gateway to the world of children and young people's participation which enhances the access to policy practice, networks and information on participation.

### **How does the Participation Unit work & how is it inclusive?**

The unit promotes participation by developing methodologies, setting standards, undertaking commissions for involving children and young people, developing the evidence base for the field, and increasing access to resources. It undertakes consultancy in developing participation strategies, training to create the foundations of building a culture of participation within organisations, and undertakes various innovative participation projects on behalf of organisations to elicit the views of children and young people. The unit includes the work of Young NCB which is a free membership network run for and by young people (under the age of 18), which enables children to feed into NCB's work, to gain new skills and to speak out on the issues that affect them.

NCB focuses on: challenging disadvantage in childhood, working with children and young people to ensure they are involved in all matters that affect their lives, promoting multidisciplinary cross-agency partnerships and good practice, undertaking high quality research and work from an evidence-based perspective, influencing government policy through policy development and advocacy, disseminating information to all those working with children and young people, and to children and young people themselves. NCB's aim is to get the relevant evidence base to the practitioner and the policy-maker as effectively as possible.

### **How does NCB influence and feed into policy making?**

NCB has expertise in all issues affecting today's children and young people. Through their membership network and strong partnerships in government, academia and the children's sector, NCB plays a vital role in maintaining a policy environment that is open to innovation and new ways of working. As part of NCB's clear commitment to partnership working across the sector, NCB also hosts a number of semi-independent organisations that focus on a single issue or a single client group.

### **Projects' Examples by the Participation Unit**

#### Participation in Governance

More than 50 people had the opportunity to explore ways of opening up governance structures to young people at a ground-breaking seminar held by NCB (September 2006). Although a key feature of *the Every Child Matters* agenda is involving children and young people in governance and leadership, many organisations find it difficult to recruit, retain and effectively engage young people in these roles. NCB's popular seminar – the first of

its kind – challenged some of the myths associated with participation and allowed delegates to hear how it works in practice. Focusing on the British Youth Council and NCB's experiences and models of working with young people, delegates were able to discuss ideas and consider what makes participation effective. Janine Young, head of participation at NCB, said: *"The participants told us that they appreciated the chance to share experiences and concerns about involving children in adult structures, and went away with ideas to develop this work."* The seminar, which was titled *Boarder Control*, was hosted in partnership with the Governance Hub, the British Youth Council and the Office of the Children's Commissioner. Another seminar is being developed for January 2007.

### Speak out and be heard: The department for Education and Skills Children and Youth Board

A group of 25 children and young people aged 8 –18 from across the United Kingdom were recruited to form the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Children and Youth Board. The Board was established to give children and young people a voice at the heart of the DfES, its work and policy. The Board was coordinated by the British Youth Council (BYC), and the National Children's Bureau (NCB) who worked with the Board to help it run smoothly and effectively. The BYC and NCB contacted lots of groups who work with children and young people to ask them to apply to be members of the Board. More than 250 children and young people applied. Children and young people were recruited through an application pack and a friendly interview in London, Manchester, Bristol and York. The Board took part in three residentials, three Ministerial meetings and regional work to find out the views of other children and young people in their local areas. Board members worked hard to find imaginative ways to consult with as many groups of children and young people as possible including, for example, young refugees, young carers, disabled young people and young people with autism. This enabled the Board to hear the views and ideas of a wide group of children and young people, which they then fed back to the DfES.

### Young people plan for climate change

With climate change currently hitting the headlines, a new project from the Greater London Authority and NCB aims to gather children's and young people's views on this issue. NCB's Participation Unit will facilitate and deliver five consultations with children and young people aged 9 –18 on proposed alterations to the London Plan – the Mayor's spatial development strategy for the capital. Policies and strategies set out within the document will have a massive effect on a range of areas including housing, transport, and supporting economic growth. The project aims to give children and young people from a wide range of backgrounds a clear understanding of the London Plan and the opportunity to feed in their views on proposed alterations. It will also help them understand their individual role in tackling climate change. Lucy Read from NCB's Participation Unit said: *'This project gives young people the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to environmental policy. They are the ones who will inherit the planet so we need to make sure that they are properly consulted on how we are going to keep it safe for future generations.'* Following the five workshops, children and young people will present their findings at an event in December at City Hall. Learning materials and a teaching plan will also be produced and posted on the Greater London Authority website.

**For further information:** [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

### 3 The Pancyprrian Coordinating Committee for The Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC), Cyprus



*The Cyprus Children's Parliament* was established in the year 2000 with primary aim to facilitate children's participation. It was long felt that children have no voice - or at least their voice was not heard – in the decision making processes and institutions. The Pancyprrian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children with the agreement of the Cyprus Parliament, decided to initiate a "Children's Parliament" copying - sort of - the adult parliament. The Children's Parliament logo (on the left) expressly unites children from all over Cyprus, the year 2001 appears on the logo as it the year their Statutes were approved and posted on the Cyprus Parliament official web page ([www.parliament.cy](http://www.parliament.cy)). On the same page you can find the reports made every year at the Special Session they hold at the "adult" parliament, presiding the President of the House.

#### **How does Children's Parliament work & how is it inclusive?**

Both the Parliament and the Children's Parliament consist of 56 Greek Cypriot and 24 Turkish Cypriot Members, plus an Armenian Cypriot, a Maronite Cypriot and a Latin Cypriot representative. Due to the 1974 invasion and separation of the state, the Parliament now operates with only 56 Greek Cypriot members and 3 community representatives - so does the Children's Parliament. There is a pending decision to invite Turkish Cypriot children to join as of the next year should this be possible.

Children parliamentarians are directly elected through a special process in schools that was enabled by the statutory School Council elections taking place every September. The representatives - one from each High School - gather at the end of December every second year (parliamentarians are elected every two years) and after two or three sessions elect among them the 56 members. Each district is allowed a certain number of members as is the case in the "adult" parliament.

The District Parliamentary Committees work on a permanent basis, having regular discussion sessions twice a month. The Plenary meets once every two months and has a specific agenda they set themselves and covering issues they feel important to discuss and to bring forward to the "adult" parliament. At the same time, 5 parliamentary committees work throughout the year discussing issues on Education, the Environment, Politics, Culture and Mass Media.

#### **How does Children's Parliament influence and feed into policy making?**

The Children's Parliament suggestions and opinions are heard by the "adult" parliament and they are asked to offer an opinion in the Parliamentary Education Committee every time they discuss issues concerning students in general.

They have been very active in pressing for an Ombudsperson for Children, and according to the newly passed Law, the Children's Parliament has to be consulted and to agree on the person to hold the position. This is a major breakthrough as it is the first time that children are recognised to have the right of expressing an opinion, and this opinion to be respected by the government. The ombudsperson is to be placed in the early 2007 and hopefully the procedure will really allow the Children's Parliament to play a decisive role.

Members of the Children's Parliament participated three times in EUROSCOLA events in Strasbourg and in two events organised by EUROCHILD AISBL with Members of the

European Parliament in Brussels. They issued a number of Press releases and took stand in major issues concerning their fields of interest in Cyprus.

#### 4 Children's Human Rights Centre of Albania (CRCA)



One of the most important projects of the Children's Human Rights Centre of Albania (CRCA) that includes all aspects of child participation is the Newsletter "Children's Voice". The Newsletter "Children's Voice" is part of the project "The Right of the Child is a Democratic Right", funded by Olof Palme International Center and SIDA, which aims to raise public awareness for a better protection and development of the children's rights in Albania.

##### **How does the Children's Voice work & how is it inclusive?**

The Newsletter "Children's Voice" aims to show concerns, problems, activities and situation of the children's rights in Tirana. It represents the word of all children in Tirana related to the implementation of children's rights in a family, schools and communities. The Newsletter is prepared by and for children, and its name "Children's Voice" was selected by children.

The Newsletter has 8 pages and is prepared by the Children's Senate of Tirana, which is a children's group that advises the Municipality of Tirana on children's issues. The members and leadership of Senate are children themselves, which represent elementary and secondary schools of Tirana (age group 6-18). CRCA role is limited only to the technical aspects of the Newsletter, such as computer preparation, while children have the leading role to decide together where to place articles, what should be on each page etc.

This project is all the more important because of the fact that children directly participate in it, giving them a chance for their voice to be heard and makes it possible for children themselves, not adults, to speak for their problems, concerns and wishes on their own point of view.

The Newsletter is prepared by the children's board, basically by the Children's Senate, while the process is facilitated by an adult, who is a staff member of CRCA. The children of Senate are representatives of all schools of Tirana, who are selected and voted for by children of each school. The Children's Senate is split into small groups and each group works for certain areas of the Newsletter. The children journalists of the Newsletter do not come only from the Children's Senate; rather they are from all schools on Tirana. They are willing to write and share with other children and adults their stories, problems, concerns or activities. At the beginning each school's representative presents their selected articles. After that the Children's Senate Editorial Board selects the best or the most interesting articles according to the themes of the Newsletter. This selection is made by the vote of Children's Senate, which decides what is more interesting and comprehensive for all children.

The Children's Senate has a regular meeting once a month in Tirana Municipality. These meetings also serve as a contact between facilitators of CRCA and children for preparation of the Newsletter. Apart from these meetings, the children of the Senate can organise, when they need, other meetings in the CRCA offices, either with facilitators of CRCA or among themselves. The Children's Senate also organises meetings among children-journalists of respective schools.

This initiative is comprehensive because the Newsletter represents the voice of all children of Tirana. All children of every school of Tirana and its suburbs, regardless of

their race, colour, gender or disability can become journalists of the Newsletter. Hence, this initiative does not exclude any group of children.

**How does the Children’s Voice influence and feed into policy making?**

The Newsletter influences indirectly the policy making, because the journalists of the Newsletter “Children’s Voice” through their articles bring their opinion and concerns, which are addressed not only to children, but to all Governmental and Non-governmental institutions. The Newsletter is widely distributed to Parliament, Government and NGO’s, which are related to or influence policy making process on children’s rights in Albania.

**For further information:** [www.crca.org.al](http://www.crca.org.al)

## 5. ToeKan /ChangeTout ASBL in Belgium



ToeKan is a cooperation platform of private citizens, companies and social organisations joining forces in fighting child & youth poverty and providing help for deprived youngsters in Belgium for their integration into the society.

Its goal is to support young people (17-24) in their efforts to live an independent life. It uses an 'Own Initiative' methodology which means working with both 'case management' and 'total coaching' techniques. The aim is to empower youngsters to lead an autonomous life.

### How does the ToeKan ASBL work & how is it inclusive?

To develop the methodology, ToeKan tried to create an instrument for the youngster to 'measure his or her progress' in goals set by the youngster him- or herself. These goals are set in the life-domains of 'work, housing and well-being'. The theme 'housing' was chosen to work in a participative way towards the development of the instrument. Therefore a participation project was set up with 10 youngsters just out of residential care.

Participation in the development of an instrument leading up to a more independent life and more empowerment of a youngster means that this process is used in 'an instrumental way' and is therefore steered by the organisation's objectives. Nonetheless, the participating youngsters were regarded equal and valuable partners and much was done to enhance the dialogue and hence the quantity and quality of information given to us.

The sessions lead up to empowerment of the youngsters themselves, giving them an explicit mandate to deliver something they have and we need: information on experiences.

In the framework of the programme youngsters met five times during the period of 2 months. All the youngsters were recruited through residential care institutions and their personnel. All organisation of the events, including entertainment, is promoted by ToeKan. A special effort was made to develop techniques (game like setting, stimuli to associate, etc) for breaking any intellectual barriers as to be able to come to a 'true dialogue'.

The inclusive quality of this event is self evident, as the participants are all children out of the home care. Those youngsters are absolutely not used being asked for their opinion, let alone being taken serious. Moreover, an important element of the participation technique was that a brief and comprehensible overview of the whole process, of which the youngsters' contribution was a part, was given with a clear notion of what was to happen with their information. If expectations of effect are created, they should be met and reported back.

### How does the ToeKan influence and feed into policy making?

The aim of the process was to influence policy making at the organisation's level. The 'lessons learned' by ToeKan in developing instruments of care giving through the participation process lead up to knowledge sharing, as it is the function of this document, and are therefore most effective in influencing policies concerning the need of children and young people to be heard in the areas of life concerning them and on instruments of governance affecting them. This can be done on any level of policy making or governance that is willing to learn about participation methods and how to use them. ToeKan shows a practical approach to participation of children and youngster and further stimulates

organisations and governmental bodies to use knowledge and information 'out there' to enhance the quality of policy making and create more effective instruments of governance.

**For further information:** <http://www.changetout.be> & <http://www.toekan.be>

## **Conclusion**

Children's participation in decision-making can take many forms: from being linked to an organisation to being nation-wide; from simply publishing their views to consultation with children by the state legislative bodies. The demonstrated practice of Eurochild members shows that more and more governmental and non-governmental policy makers realise the advantages of working with children and young people, not only for the sake of the children's own well-being, but also for the effective performing their functions by promoting a wide and constructive dialogue. What is especially worth encouragement is the tendency to view children not just as a single social group, but also to take into consideration opinions, expectations and perceptions of certain categories of children and young people, such as disabled children, children from disadvantaged backgrounds etc. It is all the more valuable when the governmental structures themselves express an interest in such information and seek to cooperate with a non-profit sector to achieve this objective.

Children's participation, thus, allows to achieve 2 major goals: on the one hand it gives children an opportunity 'to develop a genuine appreciation of democracy and a sense of their own competence and responsibility' (Hart, 1997, UNICEF), and on the other hand, as it was mentioned above, it provides a broader involvement into the social dialogue of all social groups in the process of decision- and policy-making. Eurochild hopes that the above mentioned examples could stimulate the development of this praiseworthy development in all European states.