

Research Article

Children's Participation in Decision-making: A Systematic Review of Concepts, Barriers, Enabling Factors, and Policy Implications

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Abstract.

Children's participation in decision-making is seen as a key right and vital for inclusive development, as they make up nearly one-third of Indonesia's population. While there are laws and initiatives to promote child participation, it mostly remains symbolic and not practiced effectively. A study analyzed 1112 articles from academic sources, with 79 articles selected for in-depth examination. The results show that true participation means viewing children as active citizens rather than just recipients of adult decisions. This approach not only respects children's rights but also leads to better public policies. Despite the positive potential of child participation, several challenges exist. Many adults doubt children's ability to contribute meaningfully, creating power imbalances and reducing participation to mere tokens. Participatory platforms often fail to include marginalized children or those with disabilities, and a lack of awareness about rights and opportunities hinders effective engagement. On the other hand, helpful factors include strong legal frameworks, training for children and adults, and inclusive approaches that incorporate children's views into governance. When carried out properly, child participation empowers children and leads to more effective policies. However, many children are still unaware of their rights and have low participation rates. Addressing these issues is urgent and requires focused efforts to break down barriers, improve engagement skills, and ensure children's perspectives are integrated throughout the policy-making process. Meaningful child participation is essential for building a fair and inclusive society. Urgent actions are needed to make this a reality.

Keywords: children's participation, children's rights, child rights, children's in decision making and policy making

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1. Introduction

Indonesia has demonstrated its dedication to the rights of children through the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), commonly referred to as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (KHA). This international legal framework constitutes a significant instrument that serves as a benchmark for nations globally concerning various initiatives undertaken in the pursuit of fulfilling and safeguarding children's rights. At the national level, this dedication is manifested through the formulation of diverse national policies, such as the Child-Friendly City/Regency initiative. A fundamental tenet of the KHA is the entitlement of children to engage in every decision that pertains to their lives. Nonetheless, the substantive participation of children, particularly in the public policy development process, remains exceedingly constrained.

The limitations of child participation are also highlighted in various analyses. In practice, children's right to participate is often hampered by the assumption of adults who measure children's abilities from age or maturity, so children's opinions are often ignored. Such a view is clearly not in line with the spirit of the KHA which guarantees the right of every child to be heard according to his or her capacity, without age restrictions. Policymakers in Indonesia have initiated participation forums such as the Children's Forum since 2011, and these forums are now formed in all provinces, 458 districts/cities, 1,625 sub-districts, and 2,694 villages/sub-districts (1). The Children's Forum is expected to be a pioneer and a reporter (2P) that bridges communication between children and the government in development.

However, the challenges on the ground are still huge. The Ministry of PPPA admitted that the implementation of the Children's Forum was not optimal. These forums should be inclusive (representing a wide range of children's backgrounds) and not just be formally formed. It is necessary to strengthen the capacity of forum members and their real involvement in processes such as Musrenbang, so that children's voices are truly accommodated in policy planning. In fact, Bappenas emphasized that to improve the quality of human resources, children's input needs to be heard, and children's participation is one of the strategies towards a Child-Friendly Indonesia in the 2020–2024 RPJMN (1). In other words, although normatively the right to children's participation has been recognized, its implementation is still weak so that children's voices have not been fully integrated in child protection policies in Indonesia.

2. Method

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to carry out a thorough examination of the relevant academic literature regarding children's participation in policy-making. The entire SLR process is guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which provides step-by-step guidance for the search, selection and reporting of inclusive studies. A PRISMA flowchart depicting the stages that we follow in detail.

The study used the Scopus database as the basis of a leading academic database that is renowned for its extensive coverage and a respectable reputation in the field of scientific publications. The article search is done using the boolean operator "and" this is done to narrow the search parameters. Illustrative examples of the search strings used are "child" and "participation". In addition, there is a limitation on the time range for the publication of articles from 2020 to 2025 (until April). The initial stage of the search found 1,211 articles.

The next step is to eliminate by filtering by finding all articles that discuss topics related to discussing child participation using several relevant keywords such as "children's rights", "child rights", "decision making" and "policy making". As a result, 252 articles were found and became the basis for the next screening.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Using VOSviewer software, mapping of research fields was carried out, especially changes in the subject of study from time to time. The analytical approach used includes several techniques, such as citation analysis, co-citation analysis, bibliographic merging, and co-word analysis. In addition, it also applies visualization techniques to graphically describe the relationships and patterns contained in the literature, thus providing a clearer understanding of the conceptual framework of child participation. The results of the analysis show the following picture:

Based on the results of the bibliometric mapping above, it can be seen that in general there are several main issue groups. The first group is dominated by the words *child right*, *child*, *participation* and *child participation*. This shows that children's participation is the main principle in the context of fulfilling children's rights and therefore participation cannot be separated from other contexts because this aspect becomes inherent in every discussion related to children's groups. The next group emerged with the words

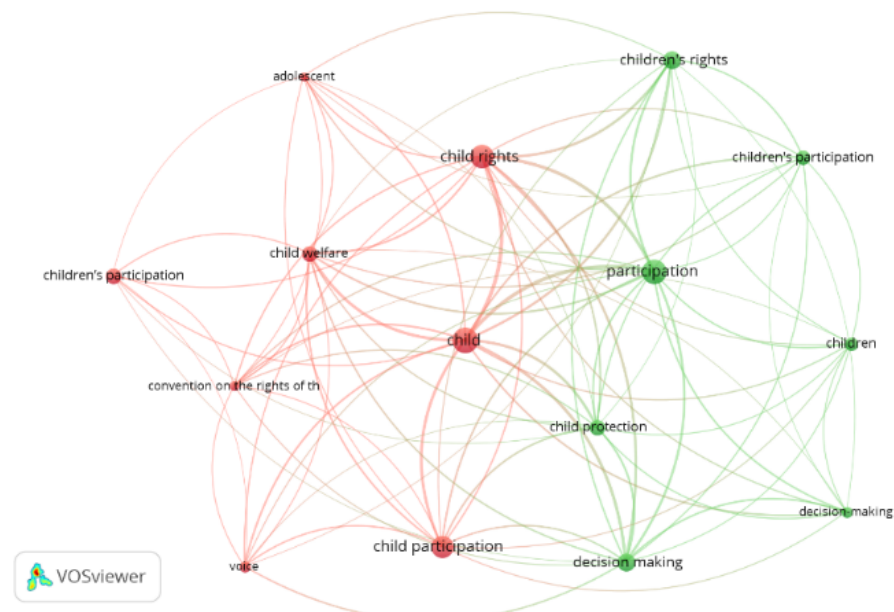


Figure 1: Source: VOSviewer Analysis.

decision making, voice, convention on the right of the children, this shows that children's participation, which was originally seen as an essential basic right of children, has shifted to the importance of children's voices being considered in the policy-making process. Engaging children meaningfully helps them transition from passive recipients to active citizens with their rights. In addition, it provides opportunities to create policies that are relevant and based on children's needs. The 'bottom-up' approach actively engages children in shaping policies and practices that directly affect their lives. This approach is grounded in the values of empowerment and inclusivity, ensuring that children's involvement in decision-making results in strategies that amplify their voices, perspectives, and experiences (2).

Various community organizations have developed participatory activities with children and youth to achieve the goals of empowerment, influence, and engagement. In policy, children's engagement is vital; they actively address arms control, anti-war, and climate change, showcasing their ability to influence pertinent issues. This highlights that their participation is a real and valuable force. Child activism necessitates a reevaluation of power dynamics among children, youth, and adults, promoting proactive engagement by children. All of this suggests that child participation can be a driver of significant change in policy (3).

Developing countries provide valuable insights on the role of children and youth as pivotal societal agents utilizing personal communication methods for advocacy. Furthermore, community development methodologies emphasize the necessity of establishing

organized platforms for intergenerational discussions regarding pertinent issues. This leads to policies that are more culturally and contextually relevant (3).

In Indonesia, meaningful participation of children, especially in the public policy formulation process, is still very limited. Children's involvement in the policy formulation process is still very limited. A UNICEF Indonesia 2020 U-Report survey of 1,687 young respondents showed that only 13% of children and adolescents had attended public meetings such as Children's Forums or Development Planning Deliberations (Musrenbang) at the village, district/city, or national levels (1). Furthermore, only 38% of children understand how to participate in these forums, while 60% of young people do not even know about the existence of Children's Forums or Musrenbang at all. This data indicates low participation of children in decision-making processes that concern them.

The limitations of child participation are also highlighted in various analyses. In practice, children's right to participation is often hampered by the assumption of adults who measure children's abilities from age or maturity, so children's opinions are often ignored. Such a view is clearly not in line with the spirit of the KHA which guarantees the right of every child to be heard according to his or her capacity, without age restrictions. Policymakers in Indonesia have initiated participation forums such as the Children's Forum since 2011, and these forums are now formed in all provinces, 458 districts/cities, 1,625 sub-districts, and 2,694 villages/sub-districts (1). The Children's Forum is expected to be a pioneer and a reporter (2P) that bridges communication between children and the government in development.

However, the challenges on the ground are still huge. The Ministry of PPPA admitted that the implementation of the Children's Forum was not optimal. These forums should be inclusive (representing a wide range of children's backgrounds) and not just be formally formed. It is necessary to strengthen the capacity of forum members and their real involvement in processes such as Musrenbang, so that children's voices are truly accommodated in policy planning. In fact, Bappenas emphasized that to improve the quality of human resources, children's input needs to be heard, and children's participation is one of the strategies towards a Child-Friendly Indonesia in the 2020–2024 RPJMN (1).

4. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

One of the democratizations is characterized by citizens being actively involved, especially at the community level. The confidence and competence to participate must be acquired gradually through experience. Therefore, it is important to provide sufficient opportunities for children to participate in democratic processes, especially in countries that have claimed to be democratic countries. With the development of children's rights, we are beginning to see greater recognition of children's ability to express themselves. This means that in this context, participation is used to describe in general the process of sharing decisions that impact the lives of individuals as well as the surrounding community. Participation serves as a tool in the construction of democracy and also as a benchmark to measure the extent to which democracy is taking place. In addition, participation is a basic right of every citizen, including children (4).

Meanwhile, on the other hand, there are many examples showing that children's participation is often patronizing and tokenistic. These include the use of children as 'decorations' in performances to entertain adult audiences, and their exploitation as 'kid influencers' on social media for commercialisation and sensationalism. Even worse, the manipulation of children's opinions for adult-initiated socio-political purposes also occurs. Tokenistic participation only invites children to speak or appear on panels without providing adequate and developmental information for them to actively participate and bring about change.

Obstacles to the social and cultural structure of society that still conceptualize the individual child as an individual who does not have the capacity to be an active citizen which results in discrimination and exclusion of children. The significance of child participation is frequently perceived merely as a procedural formality, lacking demonstrable effects on socio-political decision-making, which prompts inquiries regarding the genuineness of engagement in the daily interactions between children and adults. Many professionals recognize the importance of child participation, but see the main barrier as structural rather than realizing how it might play out in their daily conversations with children (2).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes the status of children as rights holders and that their rights should be considered as important as the rights of adults in terms of respect and fulfillment. This means that the state ensures that the child is able to form his or her own views freely on all issues affecting the child, with the child's views given due weight according to the child's age and maturity, including if it

must be communicated non-verbally such as through games, art, body language, facial expressions, or drawing and painting.

Although the participation of children and young people is increasingly in demand, there are fundamental challenges that continue to be related to their right to participation. One of the significant barriers to children's participation, particularly in the aspect of their limited capacity to voice their views, can be explained as follows:

1. **Perception and Determination of Capacity by Adults.** Adults' assumptions about children's abilities can hinder their participation in decision-making. This is related to the familiar narrative that has emerged over the past 30 years, in which the right to participate challenges the "traditional" view of children as vulnerable, dependent, and incompetent individuals.
2. **Use of Less Precise Concepts.** Terminology including 'perspectives', 'independence', 'self-governance', 'aspirations', and 'beliefs' is frequently utilized in conjunction or as substitutes for 'engagement'; however, such terms are seldom explicitly defined or differentiated.
3. **Adult Attitudes and Power Dynamics.** A prevalent issue is the attitudes of certain adults that inhibit youth participation. This encompasses the conflict between the rights to protection and participation, emphasizing adults' protective role. Adults often resist altering power dynamics to share authority with youth. This is evident when adults utilize children's involvement to further their own interests.
4. **Tokenism and Lack of Impact.** Participatory practices are often tokenistic, decorative participation and do not go beyond consultation. This means that children's views may be heard, but not given due weight or lead to a real impact on decision-making.
5. **Inequality of Access to Participation.** The articles examine challenges regarding the participation of children and youth. Concerns exist that older children and those from affluent backgrounds are more readily engaged, leading to unequal access to participation opportunities, particularly when resources are constrained.
6. Numerous scholarly investigations identify specific cohorts of children whose perspectives appear to exert a diminished impact on the decision-making process, including very young children, those who have undergone therapeutic interventions, and individuals with communicative impairments. This suggests that the

capacity that is considered “limited” in these groups often leads to their exclusion from meaningful participation.

Overall, barriers to child participation from the limited aspect of the child’s capacity to speak are not solely due to the child’s intrinsic capacity, but are strongly influenced by adult perceptions, inappropriate use of concepts, adult attitudes, power dynamics, and existing systems that fail to adapt to truly include all children (3).

5. Child Participation and Policy Quality

Meaningful child participation has a significant impact on the quality of public policy, especially through a “bottom-up” approach or from the grassroots level. The “bottom-up” approach to child participation is based on the values of empowerment and inclusivity. By involving children in the decision-making process, the resulting strategies can amplify their voices, perspectives, and experiences. This in turn aims to ensure that the policies and practices created become more relevant and reflect the needs of children directly.

Although historically child participation has often been considered a procedural step with no clear substantive impact on socio-political decision-making, this article argues that real change can occur at the micro level, i.e. through everyday conversations between professionals and children. Genuine and inclusive dialogical and transactional engagements that incorporate a child’s perspective have the potential to facilitate significant transformations that enhance children’s empowerment, enrich their experiences, foster their sense of agency, and promote the implementation of participation and citizenship.

Conversational methods like “Talking Circles” are highlighted as mechanisms to convey children’s viewpoints to policymakers and program administrators. This methodology aids in synthesizing varied representations of children to impact broader policy and programmatic frameworks.

While the potential impact of meaningful child participation on public policy is enormous, sources also note that the efficacy and significance remain uncertain, necessitating additional investigation. This suggests that there is a need to continue to understand how micro-conversations and changes at the grassroots level can effectively translate into substantive policy changes at the macro level.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

This research indicates that meaningful participation of children is crucial for inclusion in policy-making. This inclusion will enable decisions to reflect the interests of children as a rights-holding community. The challenges in utilizing participation as a framework in policy-making necessitate further investigation to develop an appropriate and context-specific model for children's involvement. In addition, a measurement tool is needed to assess the quality of children's participation.

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