



Save the Children

# Practice Standards in Children's Participation

**The International Save the Children Alliance is the world's leading independent children's rights organisation, with members in 27 countries and operational programmes in more than 100. We fight for children's rights and deliver lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.**

### **Vision**

Save the Children works for a world:

- that respects and values each child
- that listens to children and learns
- where all children have hope and opportunity.

### **Mission**

Save the Children fights for children's rights.

We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

Produced on behalf of the  
International Save the Children Alliance by  
Save the Children UK  
1 St John's Lane  
London EC1M 4AR

The printing of this document has been made possible with the support of the Ministry of Development Cooperation, Government of the Netherlands.

First published 2005

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Registered Charity No. 10768220

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Typeset by Grasshopper Design Company

Printed by Printflow Limited, UK

# Introduction to practice standards in child participation

## What are practice standards?

Practice standards<sup>1</sup> are statements that describe an expected level of performance. These practice standards state what children and others can expect of Save the Children's practice in child participation. They are designed to apply to all Save the Children's child participation work and represent minimum expectations of the ways in which staff will behave and operate.

These practice standards have been developed through years of experience supporting children's participation at both the local and global levels. This final set of standards is based on feedback and consultations with Save the Children staff, partner organisations and children in various countries and community settings.

## Why practice standards?

The primary purpose of these practice standards is to ensure consistent, high quality child participation practice throughout Save the Children's programmes. They aim to provide a framework that gives guidance and direction first and foremost to field staff in continuously improving their participatory practice. They are also intended for sharing with partners and others as the basis for dialogue about ways to ensure meaningful children's participation.

The standards can be used to:

- assist Save the Children staff in assessing their practice in child participation and identifying areas of improvement
- inform training and other approaches to competency that ensures that staff working with children have the attitudes, skills and confidence required to deliver the practice standards
- provide a basis for accountability and challenge if practice falls below a certain standard
- review and evaluate current practice and identify goals for the future
- establish a safe and meaningful environment for the participation of children and minimise the risk to children from involvement in participatory practice
- share Save the Children's understanding of meaningful children's participation with children's organisations and other partners.

## Using these practice standards

These practice standards are intended to guide the practice of staff working to support children's participation. Each standard is accompanied by a set of criteria that can be used as indicators to see whether or not the standard is being met.

The standards are designed to be relevant and achievable. At the same time, given the enormous

<sup>1</sup> Also known as 'minimum quality standards' or 'key elements'.

variation in country contexts and circumstances, they will also need to be adapted to fit local conditions. There must always be a clear understanding of the implications relating to local social, economic, cultural and traditional practices, as well as to the age and maturity of the child.

Save the Children staff should use these practice standards in conjunction with the organisation's child protection policy.

## Guiding principles

Save the Children supports meaningful, good quality children's participation that gives children a genuine opportunity to express their views, be involved in decisions or take action.

The practice standards should be interpreted within the context of the following general principles derived from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- Children have rights to be listened to, to freely express their views on all matters that affect them, and to freedom of expression, thought, association and access to information.
- Measures should be put in place to encourage and facilitate their participation in accordance with their age and maturity.
- Participation should promote the best interest of the child and enhance the personal development of each child.
- All children have equal rights to participation without discrimination.
- All children have the right to be protected from manipulation, violence, abuse and exploitation.

## Definitions

### Child/Young person

Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years.

### Participation

Participation is about having the opportunity to express a view, influencing decision-making and achieving change. Children's participation is an informed and willing involvement of all children, including the most marginalised and those of different ages and abilities, in any matter concerning them either directly or indirectly. Children's participation is a way of working and an essential principle that cuts across all programmes and takes place in all arenas – from homes to government, from local to international levels.

### Overview of practice standards in child participation

#### Standard 1

An ethical approach: transparency, honesty and accountability

#### Standard 2

Children's participation is relevant and voluntary

#### Standard 3

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#### Standard 4

Equality of opportunity

#### Standard 5

Staff are effective and confident

#### Standard 6

Participation promotes the safety and protection of children

#### Standard 7

Ensuring follow-up and evaluation

# Standard I

## An ethical approach: transparency, honesty and accountability

### What

Adult organisations and workers are committed to ethical participatory practice and to the primacy of children's best interests.

### Why

There are inevitable imbalances in power and status between adults and children. An ethical approach is needed in order for children's participation to be genuine and meaningful.

### How to meet this standard

- Girls and boys are able to freely express their views and opinions and have them treated with respect.
- There is clarity of purpose about children's participation and honesty about its parameters. Children understand how much impact they can have on decision-making and who will make the final decision.
- The roles and responsibilities of all involved (children and adults) are clearly outlined, understood and agreed upon.
- Clear goals and targets are agreed upon with the children concerned.
- Children are provided with, and have access to, relevant information regarding their involvement.
- Children are involved from the earliest possible stage and are able to influence the design and content of participatory processes.
- 'Outside' adults involved in any participatory processes are sensitised to working with children, clear about their role and willing to listen and learn.
- Organisations and workers are accountable to children for the commitments they make.
- Where the process of involvement requires representation from a wider group of children, the selection of representatives will be based on principles of democracy and non-discrimination.
- The barriers and challenges that participating children may have faced in other spheres of their lives are considered and discussed with the children involved to reduce any potential negative impacts from their participation.

## Standard 2

# Children's participation is relevant and voluntary

### What

Children participate in processes and address issues that affect them – either directly or indirectly – and have the choice as to whether to participate or not.

### Why

Children's participation should build on their personal knowledge – the information and insights that children have about their own lives, their communities and the issues that affect them. Recognising their other commitments, children participate on their own terms and for lengths of time chosen by them.

### How to meet this standard

- The issues are of real relevance to the children being involved and draw upon their knowledge, skills and abilities.
- Children are involved in setting the criteria for selection and representation for participation.
- Children have time to consider their involvement and processes are established to ensure that they are able to give their personal, informed consent to their participation.
- Children's participation is voluntary and they can withdraw at any time they wish.
- Children are involved in ways, at levels and at a pace appropriate to their capacities and interests.
- Children's other time commitments are respected and accommodated (eg, to home, work and school).
- Ways of working and methods of involvement incorporate, and build on, supportive local structures, knowledge and practice and take into consideration social, economic, cultural and traditional practices.
- Support from key adults in children's lives (eg, parents/guardians, teachers) is gained to ensure wider encouragement and assistance for the participation of girls and boys.

# Standard 3

## A child-friendly, enabling environment

### What

Children experience a safe, welcoming and encouraging environment for their participation.

### Why

The quality of children's participation and their ability to benefit from it are strongly influenced by the efforts made to create a positive environment for their participation.

### How to implement this standard

- Ways of working build the self-esteem and self-confidence of boys and girls of different ages and abilities so that they feel they are able to contribute and that they have valid experience and views to contribute.
- Methods of involvement are developed in partnership with children so that they reflect their preferred mediums of expression.
- Sufficient time and resources are made available for quality participation and children are properly supported to prepare for their participation.
- Adults (including children's own parents/guardians) are sensitised to understand the value of children's participation and are enabled to play a positive role in supporting it (eg, through awareness-raising, reflection and capacity-building).
- Child-friendly meeting places are used where girls and boys feel relaxed, comfortable and have access to the facilities they need. The meeting places must be accessible to children with disabilities.
- Organisational or official procedures are designed/modified to facilitate (rather than intimidate) children and make less experienced boys and girls feel welcome.
- Support is provided where necessary to share information and/or build skills and capacity to enable children, individually and collectively, to participate effectively.
- Children are asked what information they need and accessible information is shared with children in good time, in child friendly formats and in languages that the children understand, including children with visual or hearing impairments.
- In situations where children meet with different native/first languages, access to written information and professional interpretation is provided that allows for children's full participation in discussions.
- Non-technical language is used in all discussions involving children and/or all jargon or technical terms are clearly explained.

# Standard 4

## Equality of opportunity

### What

Child participation work challenges and does not reinforce existing patterns of discrimination and exclusion. It encourages those groups of children who typically suffer discrimination and who are often excluded from activities to be involved in participatory processes.

### Why

Children, like adults, are not a homogeneous group and participation provides for equality of opportunity for all, regardless of the child's age, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (or those of his or her parents/guardians).

### How to implement this standard

- All children have an equal chance to participate and systems are developed to ensure that children are not discriminated against because of age, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
- Children's involvement aims to include all rather than a few, this could mean reaching out to children in their local settings rather than inviting representatives to a central point.
- Participatory practice with children is flexible enough to respond to the needs, expectations and situation of different groups of children – and to regularly re-visit these concerns.
- The age range, gender and abilities of children are taken into account in the way participation is organised (eg, in the way information is presented).
- Those working with children are able to facilitate an environment that is non-discriminatory and inclusive.
- No assumptions are made about what different groups of children can and cannot do.
- All children are given an equal opportunity to voice their opinions and have their contributions reflected in any outcomes of a participatory process, including in processes that involve both children and adults.
- If there is a limit to how many children can participate, children themselves select from among their peers those who will represent them in participatory initiatives based on the principles of democracy and inclusion.
- Influential adults are engaged to gain family and community support for the participation of discriminated-against groups.



# Standard 5

## Staff are effective and confident

### What

Adult staff and managers involved in supporting/facilitating children's participation are trained and supported to do their jobs to a high standard.

### Why

Adult workers can only encourage genuine children's participation effectively and confidently if they have the necessary understandings and skills.

### How to implement this standard

- All staff and managers are sensitised to children's participation and understand the organisational commitment to children's participation.
- Staff are provided with appropriate training, tools and other development opportunities in participatory practice to enable them to work effectively and confidently with children of different ages and abilities.
- Staff are properly supported and supervised, and evaluate their participation practice.
- Specific technical skills or expertise (eg, in communication, facilitation, conflict resolution or multi-cultural working) is built up through a combination of recruitment, selection, staff development and practice exchange.
- Relations between individual staff, and between staff and management, model appropriate behaviour, treating each other with respect and honesty.
- Support is provided for managers and staff for whom children's participation represents a significant personal or cultural change, without this being regarded as a problem.
- Staff are able to express any views or anxieties about involving children in the expectation that these will be addressed in a constructive way.

# Standard 6

## Participation promotes the safety and protection of children

### What

Child protection policies and procedures form an essential part of participatory work with children.

*Please note: Save the Children staff should use these practice standards in conjunction with the organisation's child protection policy.*

### Why

Organisations have a duty of care to children with whom they work and everything must be done to minimise the risk to children of abuse and exploitation or other negative consequences of their participation.

### How to implement this standard

- The protection rights of children are paramount in the way children's participation is planned and organised.
- Children involved in participation work are aware of their right to be safe from abuse and know where to go for help if needed.
- Skilled, knowledgeable staff are delegated to address and coordinate child protection issues during participatory processes.
- Staff organizing a participatory process have a child protection strategy that is specific to each process. The strategy must be well communicated and understood by all staff involved in the process.
- Safeguards are in place to minimise risks and prevent abuse (eg, children are adequately supervised and protected at all times; risk assessments are in place for residential activities away from home; children are protected from abuse from other children).
- Staff recognise their legal and ethical obligations and responsibilities (eg, in respect of their own behaviour or what to do if they are told about the inappropriate behaviour of others). A system for reporting critical incidents is in place and understood by all staff.
- Child protection procedures recognise the particular risks faced by some groups of children and the extra barriers they face to obtaining help.
- Careful assessment is made of the risks associated with children's participation in speaking out, campaigning or advocacy. Depending upon the risks identified, steps may be needed to protect children's identity or to provide follow-up measures to give protection (eg, to ensure their safe reintegration into their communities).
- Consent is obtained for the use of all information provided by children and information identified as confidential needs to be safeguarded at all times.
- A formal complaints procedure is set up to allow children involved in participatory activities to make a complaint in confidence about any issue concerning their involvement. Information about the complaints procedure is accessible to children in relevant languages and formats.
- No photographs, videos or digital images of a child can be taken or published without that child's explicit consent for a specific use.
- Unless otherwise agreed, it must not be possible to trace information back to individual/groups of children.
- Responsibilities relating to liability, safety, travel and medical insurance are clearly delegated and effectively planned for.

# Standard 7

## Ensuring follow-up and evaluation

### What

Respect for children's involvement is indicated by a commitment to provide feedback and/or follow-up and to evaluate the quality and impact of children's participation.

### Why

It is important that children understand what has been the outcome from their participation and how their contribution has been used. It is also important that, where appropriate, they are given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities. As a key stakeholder, children are an integral part of monitoring and evaluation processes.

### How to implement this standard

- Children are supported to participate in follow-up and evaluation processes.
- Follow-up and evaluation is addressed during the planning stages, as an integral part of any participation initiative.
- Children are supported and encouraged to share their participatory experiences with peer groups, local communities, organisations and projects with which they may be involved.
- Children are given rapid and clear feedback on the impact of their involvement, the outcome of any decisions, next steps and the value of their involvement.
- Feedback reaches all children involved.
- Children are asked about their satisfaction with the participation process and for their views on ways in which it could be improved.
- The results of monitoring and evaluation are communicated back to the children involved in an accessible and child-friendly way, and their feedback is taken into account in future participation work.
- Mistakes identified through evaluation are acknowledged and commitments given about how lessons learned will be used to improve participatory processes in the future.
- Adults will evaluate how they have translated and implemented children's priorities and recommendations into their policies, strategies and programmes.
- Sustainability of support is discussed with children. Adults will provide clear feedback to children regarding the extent/limit of their commitment to support children's ongoing initiatives and organisations. If ongoing support is not possible, adults will provide children with resources and support to make contact with other agencies who can support them.



## Practice Standards in Children's Participation

Since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, many organisations across the world have taken steps to involve children and young people in their projects, services and research. They have also supported their involvement in a wide range of public decision-making. The quality of that participation work, however, has been very variable.

This publication presents a set of practice standards developed by Save the Children on the basis of its experience in children's participation in countries across the world. Although prepared for use by Save the Children staff, it is hoped they will have a much wider application and will be of interest to other child-focused agencies, NGOs and service providers. They provide operational guidance on such issues as:

- an ethical approach to children's participation
- the incorporation of child protection concerns into participatory practice
- the creation of child-friendly environments where all children can participate
- the importance of follow-up and evaluation.

The practice standards can be used in a variety of ways:

- to help understand what 'meaningful participation' looks like
- to improve individual or organisational performance in children's participation
- to assess the quality of participation as part of a retrospective evaluation
- to identify skills or knowledge gaps and develop appropriate training.

**International Save the Children Alliance  
Second Floor  
Cambridge House  
100 Cambridge Grove  
London  
W6 0LE  
United Kingdom**

**Tel: +44 (0)20 8748 2554  
Fax: +44 (0)20 8237 8000**