Project n. 101056394

CL.A.P.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS,
AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION ADDRESSING
EMERGING NEEDS IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Child Local Council's Guidelines

Co-funded by
the European Union

CL.A.P.
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION ADDRESSING EMERGING NEEDS IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Introduction and context

The guidelines for the functioning of the Child Local Council were developed within the project 'CL.A.P. - Children's Rights, Awareness and Participation Addressing Emerging Needs in Covid-19 Pandemic'.

CLAP, funded by the European programme CERV CHILD 2021, aims to contribute to raising awareness and full realisation of children's rights through actions promoting the EU strategy on children's rights with a special focus on those related to participation.

The Covid-19 pandemic, as emerged from numerous research studies, including the one carried out by the project, has had a very strong impact on the well-being of children, leading to great social isolation, the effects of which are also visible in the long term, in a delicate phase of the growth process and creating new needs to which institutions must know how to respond in order to address and overcome them.

Involving minors in the process of identifying their needs is the key to making their participation active and effective in the decision-making processes that affect them and protecting their rights, which are often violated due to a limited consideration of their perspective.

The project, therefore, supports the active role of minors as political subjects capable of identifying their needs and dialoguing with institutions to claim rights and implement shared strategies that can promote their well-being and active participation.

The partners involved CISS, IMAGO MUNDI, REPLIKA, AHEAD, ICDI and I SICALIANI implemented the actions envisaged by the project in four different countries including Italy, Romania, Spain and the Netherlands.

After a research phase involving adults involved in child protection (educators, social workers, etc.) and children on the effects of the pandemic and the new needs that emerged, the project built training courses on innovative approaches and methodologies aimed at raising awareness on children's rights and implementing the principles of Child Led Research. Lastly, through a series of round tables and meetings involving children, third sector actors and local institutions, two major results were achieved: the formalisation of a protocol committing the parties to promote the involvement of children in decision-making processes and the drafting of guidelines for the operation of a consultation system for children's representatives, which will be presented in the following pages.

CLA.P.
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION ADDRESSING EMERGING NEEDS IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Objectives of the formation and consultation of the Children's Council

Participation in political life does not only imply listening to the institutions, but also includes all the tools useful for informed involvement; the young person who wants to join and/or take part in a decision-making process must necessarily first have all the correct information in order to be able to better express his/her opinion.

The objectives of setting up a youth council, the basis of which can be found in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, are:

Promoting the right of expression: supporting the right of children to freely express their opinions is a central objective. This helps develop self-confidence and an awareness of their rights;

Promoting the development of active citizenship skills: involving children helps them to understand decision-making mechanisms and to develop citizenship skills, such as responsibility, participation and respect for the opinions of others;

encouraging responsibility and autonomy: participating in decisions that affect them makes them more responsible towards their choices, stimulating a sense of autonomy and maturity;

improving the quality of decision-making: the contribution of children brings unique and relevant perspectives, enriching adults' understanding of issues affecting children and adolescents and enabling fairer decisions in line with their real needs;

preventing exclusion and marginalisation: creating spaces where children can participate and feel heard helps prevent exclusion and the risk of social marginalisation, especially for children and young people living in vulnerable contexts;

promote well-being and personal satisfaction: being part of decisions that affect their daily life or future strengthens children's sense of belonging, acceptance and emotional well-being.

Participation, therefore, implies and presupposes awareness and the ability to influence.

Functioning of the Council

The children's council is a group of children who represent the children's community in dialogue with the institutions by expressing their ideas, opinions and wishes on issues affecting their school, neighbourhood or the city in which they live.

The council functions as a team and the presence of every child is important.

The council meets regularly to discuss issues that are important to the children. During these meetings, everyone can take the floor to express their opinions, talk about needs that have arisen and propose new activities. There are no rigid roles: everyone is encouraged to cooperate and participate freely.

Each child can carry out different tasks depending on the needs of the group: taking notes on what is said during the meeting; gathering ideas by talking to friends and bringing the proposals back to the assembly; organising activities, such as games or small events to help make the council known to other children; representing the council when there is a need to communicate with adults such as teachers, headmasters or other institutional figures.

If there are special projects, the council can set up small groups to work on a specific topic, such as caring for the environment, outdoor play or well-being at school. These groups engage in devising activities, games or new proposals to share with everyone during the meetings.

An adult can support this participative process to help the child/children ensure that their ideas and proposals are heard and that they can implement the projects.

Characteristics of the Children's Council

The Children's Council is a free and open space where children and young people learn to discuss, confront and bring forward their concerns.

In order for the council to function, certain fundamental elements must be observed:

awareness and information. Everyone should have access to the right and correct information on the topics discussed, understanding their right to participate and the impact their opinions may have on the final decisions;

freedom of choice. Participation must be voluntary, without any pressure. Young people can decide if and when to participate and have the right to change their minds at any time;

mutual respect. At all stages of the process, it is crucial that participants are treated with respect and consideration. They must have the freedom to express their ideas without fear, feeling valued and listened to in the context of participation;

relevance and meaningfulness. The issues addressed must be relevant to the experience and interests of the participants. Participation initiatives are most engaging and useful when they focus on issues that are meaningful to the child(ren);

adaptation to age and context. Participatory activities should be age-appropriate to the age of the participant with clear explanations and the necessary support from adults;

inclusiveness and welcoming. Everyone must feel welcome and valued, regardless of their differences, without discrimination. An inclusive environment allows for free expression;

safety and risk awareness. It is essential to ensure a safe and secure environment, in which participants can express themselves without fear. adults must clarify the measures taken to protect the safety of children by creating an environment free from negative judgements or consequences;

accountability and transparency of results. At the end of the process, the children/young people should receive feedback on how their ideas were considered, on possible applications and on next steps. This allows them to perceive the value of their contribution and the real impact of participation.

The phases of the participatory process

The participatory process, once the Children's Council is established, consists of four different phases: preparation, consultation, restitution and evaluation.

In the first phase, participants inform themselves about the issues they care about and begin to construct their opinions. Among the tools they can use are

libraries and public spaces. Public and school libraries offer access to books, magazines and newspapers on a wide range of topics, from the environment to human rights;

educational platforms and reliable websites that deal with complex topics in an accessible way, often through articles, videos and infographics;

discussions with teachers, parents and relevant adults;

public events and local initiatives. Participating in local events, conferences or initiatives on topics of interest to them can allow children to meet people working in the field and explore current issues, often through direct experiences or testimonies;

social media and video platforms. Although it is important to pay attention to sources, some social media offer informative videos on various topics. Reliable creators and science communicators often present content designed for children, making complex topics more accessible and interesting.

The second phase involves the presentation and discussion of opinions. Consultation can also take place with non-members so as to include multiple voices and perspectives.

The third phase entails interaction and dialogue with institutions, be they educational institutions, municipal districts, etc. . This could take place through different modalities and in spaces, be they physical or online, that are easily accessible to children and young people. Adults could also make use of interviews, focus groups and digital platforms to facilitate an ongoing dialogue with the children and allow them more opportunities to express their ideas on issues and areas that concern them. This moment may be more delicate as the participants in the council will share what was discussed in the assembly (second phase) by also representing the other children through the presentation of their needs and demands.

The last phase, the evaluation phase, includes the analysis of the impact and results the Council has achieved. Receiving feedback and a response from the people with whom the Council has interacted, whether positive or negative, is fundamental to valorising the ideas and opinions gathered from the participants and, if necessary, reshaping them to pursue achievable and satisfactory objectives.

Future Perspectives

In order to ensure an effective and inclusive youth council, it is essential to adopt practices that promote the development of young people's decision-making capacities and foster the building of a participatory and aware community. The guidelines that emerged highlight that the role of adults in listening and support is crucial; their participation must be based on attentive, respectful and constructive listening.

Implementing these guidelines contributes to creating an active children's council, where decision-making skills can be developed for informed participation in community life. These principles help to build a society in which each child feels valued, responsible and a protagonist in his/her own future.