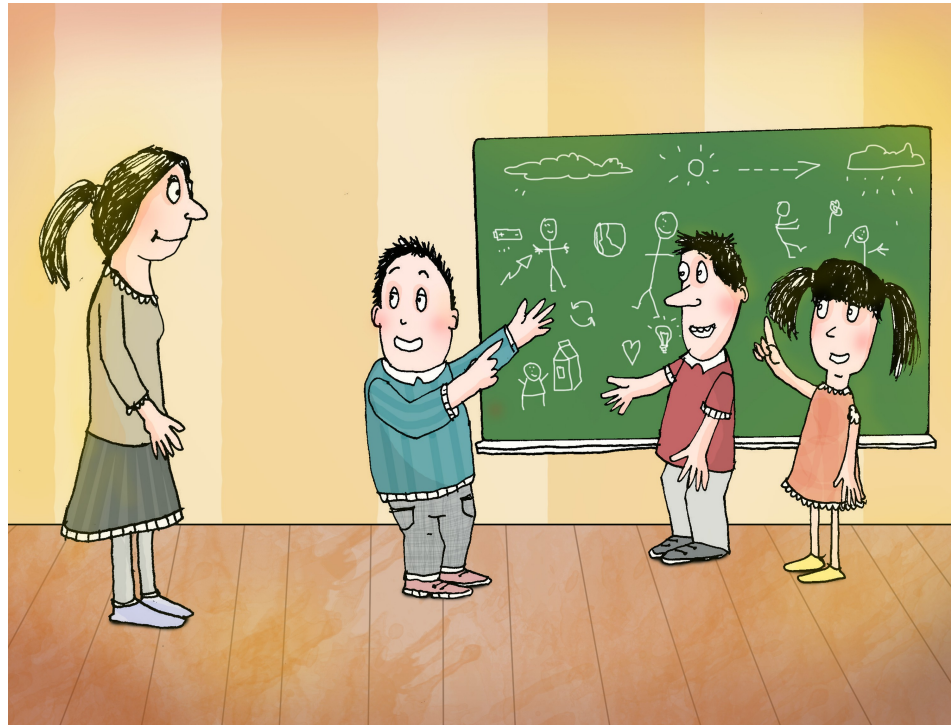




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A brief summary of the study

**Children's participation and involvement in
decision-making processes**

Tallinn 2013

Introduction

“To tell us (to children and young people) about our rights, ask for our opinion and give it a due weight as well as involve us into various activities on the city/local municipality level (especially into the process of events planning and conducting) and inform us about the events” (a girl aged 15 from Jõhvi)

According to population census data in the beginning of 2012 there were 246 346 children living in Estonia, that is a bit more than 18% of the population of Estonia. It is approximately 17% less in comparison with the period ten years ago and in general the population of Estonia decreased by 2% .¹

Demographical processes deepen the differences between the municipalities as far as the density of population and their gender – age composition is concerned. The latest report presented by the State controll² informs us that the number of young people aged under 14 has decreased both in the county centers, nearby municipality units as well as in other parts of the country. Let alone the county centers and nearby country units, the other parts of the country in 2012 have approximately 30 % less children in comparison with year 2002. In the rural areas under the period of 10 years the number of children increased only in Harjumaa, while on Hiiumaa in the end of 2012 there lived 50 % less children then 10 years ago. The quality of children and young people life influence the whole society organization and especially the organization of life in their native places. Whether the way to school is safe, the local transportation system organization meets the needs of children, what kind of free time and leisure activities opportunities are in the area, whether school is child friendly and playgrounds interesting for children etc – those are just some questions the answers to which are still very important for both children and young people.

According to article 15 in European local governments’ Charta it is not possible to make any changes on the territory of the local government prior to open discussion and consultation with local society.

The document of European Parliament Assemble ”European Children strategy” advises European Union member states before passing the law or confirming the action plans to evaluate their influence on children. According to EU Charta on Fundamental rights article 24 paragraph 2 in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child’s best interests must be a primary consideration.³

One of the features of developed democratic society is all social groups’ interests and needs consideration as well as their social involvement. According to UN Convention of the Rights of the Child⁴ basic idea any child, regardless of age, is considered to be an autonomous and active rights possessor. This idea is presented in the CRC article 12, which guarantees the child the right to form the views on the matters directly affecting the child’s life, to be heard and the views of the child to be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

¹ Rahvaloenduse tulemused. Statistikaamet 2012. More information on the web: <http://www.stat.ee/63779>

² Riigikontrolli aruanne: Ülevaade riigi vara kasutamisest ja säilimisest 2012.–2013. aastal (2013). More information on the web: <http://www.riigikontroll.ee/Suhtedavalikkusega/Pressiteated/tabid/168/ItemId/686/amid/557/language/et-EE/Default.aspx>

³ EU Charta on Fundamental rights. More information on the web: <http://eurlex.europa.eu/et/treaties/dat/32007X1214/htm/C2007303ET.01000101.htm>

This article concentrates on the right of the child to have his or her views and express opinions guaranteeing the child the right to participate and be a part of the process of information exchange as well as the dialogue between the child and the adults⁵. It is necessary to assure that the child capable of forming his or hers independent opinion exercises the right to express it freely. UN Committee of the Rights of the Child points out that the article 12 in Convention of the Rights of the Child does not set any age limits and encourages to involve the child in a decision making process concerning all affecting the child matters starting from the early age⁶.

On the state level children and the youth involvement is being supported by adopted by the government of Estonia Children and family development program 2012 -2020. Children's ombudsman stresses the importance of considering the children and young people opinion while organizing the life on the local level⁷. Recently the position of the society regarding the children and youth involvement became supportive. Still there is a need to promote the principle, that children and young people considering their level of maturity could be involved in planning the life on the local level and can actively express their opinion on the given topics.

Little researches have been so far conducted in Estonia studying children' participation and involvement promotion. In February 2010 European Commission Directorate –General for Justice conducted Eurobarometer qualitative research "Rights of the child through children's eyes"⁸ among the children and the youth from 27 member states, in the course of which young people pointed out that they would like to obtain a greater role in the process of discussion and decision making especially concerning the issues that affect them and their society directly or at least to have an opportunity to do so.

⁴ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. More information on the web: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/24016>

⁵ UN Committee of the Rights of the Child general comment nr 12 (2009) „The right of the Child to Express opinion“ p 3. More info on the web: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.doc>

⁶ Ibid. p 20

⁷ Reinomägi. A., „Viiendik ühiskonnast, kellega arvestada“ Postimees, 10. oktoobril 2013. More information on the web: <http://lasteombudsman.ee/et/andra-reinomagi-artikkel-viiendik-uhiskonnast-kellega-arvestada>

⁸ Eurobarometer research „The rights of the child through its own eyes“ (2010). More info on the web: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/rights-of-the-child_et.pdf

The necessity to promote democratic values (especially the rights of the child) in Estonia is confirmed by monitoring "The Rights of the Child and the Precedence 2012" , published on the 1st of June in 2012 by Praxise and Children's ombudsman. According to which 23% of adults and 16% of children have never heard about the right of the child (with the exception of North-East of Estonia, where 67% of children disagreed with the statement that all the children have equal rights). Monitoring also showed that the majority of children are on the position that listening to a child's opinion is as important as to the adult's one (96% of questioned children rather agreed with this statement or fully agreed with it). Two thirds of children (69%) fully disagreed or agreed partially that it is possible to ask for child's opinion but it is not necessary to give it a due weight. Thus, for a large group of children it is important to be heard and taken seriously. Almost all the children agreed that as far as the questions affecting the children are concerned it is always necessary to ask for their opinion (97%). Three fourth of children (76%) agreed that children must have an opportunity to express their opinion about the questions directly connected with the processes affecting their life. At the same time, monitoring proved that at the moment in Estonia in comparison with other countries little do children have opportunities to influence the organization of their school life and the matters on the greater social level. Children in Estonia still have little opportunities to influence school life regulations as well as the tendencies affecting children's life on a larger social scale.

Earlier NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare in cooperation with Association of Estonian Cities and Estonian Youth Organizations Union conducted a wide-range opinion poll "Children's involvement support and participation in decision making process" under the period from October 2012 till May 2013. In 2006 NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare conducted via internet an opinion poll for municipalities in order to get information whether and how local governments involve both children and the young people in the process of social life planning on the local level. That time 34 local governments participated in the poll. Under the course of the present research a recurrent opinion poll was conducted among municipalities. In order to compare the results and to clarify the position of the young people this time the opinion poll was also conducted among the youth. Its goal was to clarify the best local authorities' practices, priorities for participation and ways of involvement of both the youth and children, as well as to gather both target groups proposals on how to improve and develop the situation in this field. For data collection a website www.connect.ee was used (questionnaires can be found in part 4. Appendix). Such form of research as an opinion poll is preferable as it allows not only to gather a great amount of information and data to work with, but also to cover a larger group of respondents and offer them a greater number of questions to answer⁹. In 2012 the questionnaires on paper back were filled by the participants of the youth forum „101 Children at Toompea“ during preliminary meetings together with children who participated in children's summer camps in Remniku in June – July in 2013.

⁹ Karu, M.; Turk, P.; Biin, H.; Suvil, H. (2012) Lapse õiguste ja vanemluse monitooring. Laste ja täiskasvanute küsitluse kokkuvõte. Center of Political studies Praxis. More information on the web:

http://lasteombudsman.ee/sites/default/files/lapse_oiguste_ja_vanemluse_monitooringu_kokkuvote.pdf

¹⁰ Hirsjärvi, S., Remes, P., Sajavaara, P. (2004). *Üuri ja kirjuta*. Tallinn: Medicina. Lk 182.

Among those there were Russian speaking children and young people from Ida-Virumaa. The questionnaires were drawn up and distributed by our activist Kiira Nauts (NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare), the summary of the research was written by Helika Saar (NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare). We are very grateful to our partners who helped to distribute the questionnaires: as far as the questionnaires for children and young people are concerned we would like to thank Estonian Youth Unit, Association of Civil studies, Association of Estonian Cities, Association of Municipalities of Estonia, internet network mitteformaalne.ee, European Youth, Estonian Pupils Representations union and a special thanks for a great job that the following organization did working with municipalities, namely: Association of Estonian Cities and Association of Municipalities of Estonia. A very special thanks to Hille Ilves (Association of Estonian Cities), Liina Rüüte (Estonian Youth unit) and Mart Kimmel (Association of Civil studies).

115 municipalities from all over Estonia participated in the opinion poll, their suggestions and best practices (in the text in *italics*, no changes to the initial text were made) are presented in the part I of the research *Municipalities as involvers* (marked in orange). Among the participants there were the representatives of not only Estonian large cities but also the small rural municipalities. We are very pleased to inform that this time there were three times more municipalities participating in the opinion poll in comparison with 2006 as well as more good practices that are being implemented on the local level. We would like to thank all the municipalities' representatives who found it possible to participate in the opinion poll and shared their experience.

In the Part II of the research *Children and Young People as participants* (marked in blue) the opinion and suggestions of the young people from all over Estonia are presented (in the text: *in italics, no changes to the original text were made*). 688 Estonian and Russian speaking children and the youth aged 9- 26 participated in the opinion poll (the majority were aged 12-17). It is

worth mentioning that they were from 110 schools from all over Estonia among those there were basic schools, gymnasiums as well as vocational training centers. NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare would like to thank all the children and the young people who participated in the opinion poll as well as to their leaders.

The importance of the topic was proved by the participants' activity thus, it needs both public attention and discussion. The process of involvement proves the young people that their opinion is important for the society and that it influences the milieu around them. The present research showed that young people have a lot of ideas how life on the local level can be organized and the majority municipalities recognize the necessity of children and the youth participation. Municipalities do get acquainted with the research results and the best practices and consider the suggestions to implement them on the local level!

Wishing you active participation and involvement,
NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare

3. Summary

It is necessary to listen to and give a due weight to the children's and the young people's opinion. When not accepted the feedback should be provided. Still, if the presented opinion is not given a due weight why ask on the first place? (a 12 year old girl from Suure -Jaani)

Municipalities develop the principles according to which legal rights and freedoms are guaranteed on the local level to every single person and they (including children and the young people) have the right to participate in the work of the local authorities. Involving the children and young people in the local life planning demands the necessity to give a due weight to their opinion, providing the feedback as well as communicating with them as with equal partners. The research "*Children participation support and involvement in the decision making processes*" proved that young people involvement must be a continuous cooperation process between the youth and the local municipalities in the frames of which it is necessary to recognize the good practices as well. There is a great number of active youth who would like to share their opinion and suggestions on how to improve the life on the local level as well as many municipalities whose experience of young people involvement may be used as a positive example.

3.1. Municipalities as involvers

The present part introduces the major results received under the course of the opinion poll conducted among the local municipalities. The list of best practices being used by the municipalities can be found in the part devoted to municipalities in the particular subparagraphs. 60,9% of all municipalities participated in the opinion poll get the young people involved on the agreement basis at the same time about half of the municipalities never asked the children opinion concerning the methods of involvement. Comparing to the results that NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare from the opinion poll conducted in 2006 the number of municipalities involving the youth on agreement basis has decreased. Yet, 64% participants confirmed that they use agreement basis involving children and young people. The majority of the municipalities involve pupils from basic school; two thirds of participants involve secondary school pupils.

The positive sign is that approximately half of the municipalities involve in the process of planning the life on the local level primary school pupils as well. One of the young participants gave a very interesting comment on the present topic's aspect: "*As far as this topic is concerned there is a need to start to involve the children from the early age, namely starting in the kindergarten. If the child will get a positive experience in the early age, in the future he will be more willing to share his or her opinion freely as well as to invite others to do so.*" Getting the

children and young people involved we should use appropriate methods. The majority of participants prefer to get acquainted with the young people opinion using various questionnaires (ex at school, youth center etc), less than the half use various creative competitions (drawing contests, essay contests etc) and public discussions where the participants are the representatives of the municipalities, the members of municipality council and the youth. Only one third of the municipalities meets both children and their parents in order to ask for children's opinion. In comparison with the results dating back to 2006 today municipalities use more and more questionnaires, reasonably decreased the number of meetings with both children and parents.

In comparison with NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare opinion poll results dating back to 2006 there are some changes that made us reconsider some points concerning the children and young people involvement on the local level. Namely, today municipalities are more interested in the young people opinion concerning their free time organization (92% > 85%), and less about their school life (77% < 82%) and about cultural life on the local level (56% < 79%), and almost 50 % less are interested about their opinion concerning environmental issues (19% < 34%) as well as public transport questions (15% < 29%).

The majority of municipalities prefer to involve the youth via schools. Half of the participants have turned to children directly, and almost as many municipalities did it through children's/youth organizations or pupils representations. Still we need to repeat, that in comparison with data dated back to 2006 the number of direct communication between municipalities and the youth decreased. The research proved that 40,9% municipalities never involve either children or young people in the process of Action plan forming, while more than 50% of the municipalities never involve the youth in the annual process of Action plan revision and adjustment or they do not do that on regular basis (annually). At the same time according to European Municipalities Charta article 5 municipalities cannot initiate any changes on their territory prior to conducting a public discussion in order to get the public opinion on the issues in question.

Municipalities prefer to share information most of all via Facebook (youth centers, schools, youth councils, districts); school (school info board, school radio, school newspaper, e-school, school website, school informational channels, school Facebook page, m-form master or through form masters), municipalities' website; local newspaper; youth center (youth center website, youth center channels, youth center blog, information boards in the youth center, youth center Facebook page). The media used for information sharing generally corresponds to the young participants preferences (see p. 2.14.). At the same time, while sharing information there is a need to consider the differences between the language groups, especially knowing that the significant group of the opinion poll participants were Russian speaking young people from Ida-Virumaa who actively use VKontakte social network (www.vk.com) to get the information about events on the local level.

The present research also illustrated the fact that Estonian's municipalities abilities differ. Namely, some municipalities confirmed that they do not have necessary resources (among those are youth worker) to systemize the children and young people involvement on the local level. As far as the topic relevant materials are concerned municipalities complained that they do not have enough materials in Estonian.

3.2. Children and young people as participants

The present part introduces the major results received under the course of the opinion poll conducted among the children and young people. The target groups' suggestions on the children and young people involvement and participation are presented in part 3.3. In order to make sure that the children and young people can execute their right to introduce their opinion first we need to increase the awareness about the rights of the child among them. Regardless the situation, in

Estonia Convention of the Rights of the Child was passed already in 1991 and the state curriculum for basic school recommends to introduce it. 61,3% of the participants (considering that among those the number of Russian speaking young people from Ida-Virumaa was more than 75%), stated that they have never heard about Convention. Thus, it proves that still today there is a need to work more towards raising the awareness about the rights of the child (also in Russian), and present the Convention of the Rights of the Child in various ways as an internationally recognized general document about the rights of the child. 67,3% of the opinion poll participants were aware about their right to express their opinion about the issues concerning the local life organization. That is why it is important to provide both children and the youth the chance to execute their rights, also, it is important to maintain the young people interest and the readiness to participate in the discussion (54,4% young opinion poll participants want to be asked for their opinion on the issues concerning local life organization and planning).

Different researchers¹¹ prove that there are certain issues which young people do not want to comment on (ex society life organization), what, in its turn, may prevent them from being involved in the decision making process concerning school life organization as well as other wider topics concerning social life. At the same time, different authors¹² stress that it is necessary to teach children how to participate in the discussion and express their own opinion, as this ability does not develop naturally in the process of growing up, but only through practical experience all lifelong. For both the children and young people to form their understanding of democratic society it is not enough to learn the corresponding terms at civil studies lessons, but what really helps is to do so through discussions and personal experience, only this way they will be able to have their own opinion, learn to express it, participate in discussion and decision making process (65,1% of children and young people confirmed that participating in the opinion polls they thus express their opinion on issues in question).

For child's development it is important that when he or she expresses opinion one must be heard and it will be given a due weight. In this case the child will feel that one has a possibility to influence the process and change the situation (25,6% young participants could not answer whether their opinion was considered and it was given a due weight in the process of decision making concerning the issues on the local level). The information presented earlier could be referred to the situation when their opinion was asked (see p. 2.6. and 2.7.) or the feedback was not provided (see. p. 2.11.).

Still, we need to confirm that 6,1% of municipalities participated in the present opinion poll have never considered the children and young people opinion or given it a due weight regardless the fact that they actually involved the young people in the process, and more than 1/3 of municipalities have never asked for the level of satisfaction of young people in their feedback forms. It is not the school solely who is responsible for bringing up a citizen, but also supportive family, extracurricular and leisure activities (organizations, special interest groups), as well as society position in general.

Half of the children and young people have heard about their right to express their opinion on the issues concerning life organization on the local level at school, 1/3 at home and 1/5 got to know about them at youth organization. Yet, we have to admit that the choice of active organizations aiming at young people on the local level is often limited (see p.2.13.). Beside the need to initiate new active organizations there is a need for the existing ones to become more visible and introduce their work in more active manner on the local level.

¹¹ Karu, M.; Turk, P.; Biin, H.; Suvi, H. (2012) Lapse õiguste ja vanemluse monitooring. Laste ja täiskasvanute küsitluse kokkuvõte. Political research center Praxis. More info on the web:

http://lasteombudsman.ee/sites/default/files/lapse_oiguste_ja_vanemluse_monitooringu_kokkuvote.pdf

¹² James, A., James, A. L. (2008) Key Concepts in Childhood Studies. SAGE key concepts. Los Angeles, California – London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Due to little activity or inability to inform children and young people about their right to express their opinion about the issues connected with organization of life on the local level only 7,4% of young people mentioned municipalities among the information sources. According to the results of the present research 79,1% visited municipalities' websites, but only 43,75% of children and the young people use it as the source of information. Still, 60% of the participated in the research municipalities confirm that they do not have a specially designed link for children on their official website and they have never considered creation of child friendlier website. Considering the information presented above municipalities should think about the possibility to review their websites in order to make them more attractive to children.

Less than 75% of children and young people participated in the opinion poll stated that their opinion was asked for at school, also it was the representatives of youth organizations as well as youth workers from municipalities who did it. There is an impressive comment made by young research participant:

„Children and young people's involvement starts in the family and continues on the school level. At school children have a chance to participate in the work of pupil's representation or local youth council or initiate a discussion with the teachers. On the municipality level it is necessary to involve young people in forming and in the work process of the local youth council as it will make it possible for the youth to understand minor details as well as to understand the nuances of the municipality management.

First of all children and young people gave the answers to the questions connected with the place where they live, followed by the school life issues, free time activities, local cultural life (concerts, events etc). The results of the present research confirmed the outcomes of monitoring conducted by Praxis and children's ombudsman in 2012, namely the fact that as far as general questions such as political decisions concerning the issues affecting the children and making the time schedule for local transport, young people have little to say but for a very limited number of opinion poll participants.

Commenting on involvement ways it is necessary to mention that children and young people prefer to answer the questions connected with local life organization at school (both in the form of the questionnaire and discussion), but rather choosing forms and questionnaires. At the same time there is a considerable number of people who prefer discussion rings, thus both schools and municipalities can use this method of involvement more to find out the children and the young people opinion about various issues. Dealing with involvement it is important to consider the preferences of different language groups. The present research proved that many Russian speaking opinion poll participants from Ida-Virumaa would prefer to express their opinion first of all in VKontakte (www.vk.com) social network.

The comment made by one of the poll participants can be a perfect summary: *„the more chances the better“*.

3.3. Some suggestions on involvement and participation promotion

Children and the youth involvement improves the life on the local level and strengthens the feeling of belonging. The importance of the topic on the society level was proved by not only the active participation in the opinion poll but also the fact that both young people and the representatives of the municipalities made numerous suggestions on children and young people involvement promotion. Please find the general message send by the youth and municipalities through their suggestions (the complete list of suggestions can be found in subparagraphs 1.16. and 2.17.):

Municipalities as involvers: more resources, more information, more cooperation, more involvement and encouragement, to use various involvement methods.

Children and young people as participants: listen to what we have to tell! Ask us more! Inform and encourage us! Get us involved in different ways! Organize more activities and events on the local level! Children and young people, be more active!

At the first sight it seems that the suggestions made by both target groups are very similar. Analyzing the answers it is possible to say that municipalities should be more active in the process of involvement: to provide information to a larger group of people and cooperation on various levels, use appropriate methods of involvement and information channels as well as to pay more attention to children's encouragement.

Children and the young people have various ideas about life improvement on the local level and they expect that they will be heard and their opinion will be considered in the process of organization and planning the life on the local level. According to the suggestions made by UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to Estonia in 2003 the state should support the recognition of the child and young person opinion at home, court, care and welfare organizations and other institutions, also to organize special training programs for parents, teachers and other working with children and young people specialists under the course of which they will be trained to help children to express their opinion, provide the relevant and practical information as well as consultations and give their opinion a due weight.

The process of communication between municipalities and the children and the youth must function in the society in both ways naturally, because this way we shall bring up valuable and active citizens who are ready to input to benefit the whole society.

Children and the young people were very sincere in their answers now it is time for the municipalities to give their suggestions due weight and consider their opinions!