



# From Participatory Research to Advocacy with Children and Youth on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

## Acknowledgements

This learning brief was developed by Helen Veitch and Claire Cody from [Children Unite](#), consultants for ECPAT International, in collaboration with Sendrine Constant, ECPAT International Director of Programmes.

ECPAT International acknowledges the core funding support for its overall organisational objectives from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and Oak Foundation.

The opinions expressed in this document belong solely to ECPAT International. Support from these donors does not constitute endorsement of the views expressed.

Suggested citation: ECPAT International. (2026). Children Know Better Learning Brief. From Participatory Research to Advocacy with Children and Youth on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.

© ECPAT International, 2026.

For feedback or suggestions please contact [researchteam@ecpat.org](mailto:researchteam@ecpat.org)

Reproduction is authorised with acknowledgment of source as ECPAT International.

Published by:  
ECPAT International  
328/1 Phaya Thai Road, Ratchathewi,  
Bangkok 10400, THAILAND.  
Phone: +66 2 215 3388 | Email: [info@ecpat.org](mailto:info@ecpat.org)  
Website: [www.ecpat.org](http://www.ecpat.org)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>From Participatory Research to Advocacy with Children and Youth on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse</b>	<b>4</b>
Purpose	4
Background	5
<b>At-a-glance learning summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Why Participatory Advocacy Matters</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Key Learning on Participatory Advocacy</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Learning Point 1: Clarifying roles, consent and risks between research and advocacy</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Pausing between phases to revisit roles and expectations	7
1.2 Revisiting consent and risk management before public advocacy	9
<b>Learning Point 2: Using children’s research experience to inform advocacy planning and messaging</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Use research findings as the foundation for advocacy planning	9
2.2 Applying children’s research skills and priorities to advocacy planning	10
2.3 Drawing on children’s research and dialogue experience to refine advocacy messages	11
2.4 Developing evidence-backed recommendations for advocacy targets	12
<b>Learning Point 3: Creating enabling and protective environments for participatory advocacy</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1 Treating awareness-raising as continuous, not one-off	12
3.2 Identifying specialised skills and roles to support children’s advocacy	13
3.3 Strengthening advocacy through allies and partnerships	14
3.4 Addressing the tensions around personal testimonies	14
<b>Learning Point 4: Allowing time for advocacy action, follow-up, and accountability</b>	<b>15</b>
4.1 Planning long-term follow-up on commitments	15
4.2 Recognising and strengthening children’s leadership skills	16
<b>Learning Point 5: Using monitoring, evaluation and learning to strengthen practice</b>	<b>16</b>
5.1 Using MEL as a reflective learning process, not only reporting	16
5.2 Creating safe spaces to document challenges as well as successes	17
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>20</b>



# FROM PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH TO ADVOCACY WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH ON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

## Purpose

This learning brief brings together learning and reflections on the links between participatory research and participatory advocacy on child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) and related harms. It focuses on the stages of participatory advocacy where children undertake research activities (data collection and analysis) to identify the key issues (findings) for change. Using these key findings, advocacy actions and plans are developed targeting appropriate advocacy targets.

In this paper we define participatory advocacy as 'child driven advocacy' where children play a role in identifying and leading activities that are of significant interest to them, but where adults (youth facilitators and partner staff) may, at times, 'step in' to further develop or deliver activities.<sup>1</sup>

In bringing together this learning, we hope to fill recognised gaps in understanding the key considerations for engaging children in participatory research and advocacy on the topic of CSEA and related harms along with strategies to support their efforts.<sup>2</sup>

## Background

The brief draws primarily on reflections and evaluation data from ECPAT International's *Children Know Better* project, implemented in Bangladesh and Nepal. From February 2024 to December 2025, the project worked with 46 child leaders aged 12-16, supported by 20 youth facilitators aged 20-25, to conduct peer research with 342 children and 51 adult decision makers on CSEA and related harms. Child leaders were also involved in participatory analysis, report writing, awareness-raising and advocacy activities aimed at influencing local and national stakeholders. As an example of Participatory Action Research (PAR), in the *Children Know Better* project the key 'action' or 'advocacy' activities were 'community dialogues' between child leaders and community decision makers where decision makers were asked by child leaders how they would address research findings and implement relevant recommendations.

An external evaluation of *Children Know Better* was undertaken in 2026 using outcome harvesting to assess the outcomes, systems-level influence, and ethical quality of the project's participatory approaches. All quotes in this learning brief are from participants involved in this evaluation or learning activities from the *Children Know Better* project. In addition, the brief incorporates learning from several other projects implemented by ECPAT International and their partners that included elements of recruitment and capacity development of children. This includes the '*Building sustainable tourism destinations that protect children from sexual exploitation*' project in Costa Rica and Ecuador and '*She Leads*', a joint programme of work aiming to increase influence of girls and young women on decision-making and the transformation of gender norms across Africa and the Middle East. The brief also draws from two global learning discussions held in January and February 2026 with practitioners and academics who have significant experience of participatory approaches to research and advocacy in a wide range of country contexts.

**Existing ECPAT Resources:** In recognising the additional considerations that participatory advocacy on issues related to CSEA and related harms may require, ECPAT International developed the guidance document, [Approaches for Youth Engagement in Advocacy on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).<sup>3</sup> This document was written specifically for ECPAT members or any CSOs wanting to involve children in advocacy on CSEA. This guidance was used in Bangladesh and Nepal as part of the *Children Know Better* project and takes a phased approach based on the advocacy cycle: a) set up and selection of child and youth advocates, b) research and analysis c) advocacy planning and design d) awareness raising and mobilisation, e) advocacy action and f) learning and review.

# AT-A-GLANCE LEARNING SUMMARY

1

**Roles, consent and risk:** Pause between research and advocacy phases to revisit roles, expectations and consent with children, parents and carers. Public advocacy introduces new visibility and risk, requiring renewed discussion of safety, boundaries and the level of engagement children feel comfortable undertaking.

2

**Research-informed planning and messaging:** Use children's research findings, analytical skills and intergenerational dialogue experience to shape advocacy goals, stakeholder mapping and messaging. Grounding advocacy in evidence strengthens credibility while adult facilitators provide technical and strategic support where needed.

3

**Enabling and protective environments:** Treat awareness-raising as continuous rather than one-off, actively challenge victim-blaming attitudes, and identify specialised facilitation and safeguarding roles. Working with allies and partners distributes responsibility for change and reduces pressure on individual child advocates.

4

**Time, accountability and learning:** Allow sufficient time for advocacy action, follow-up and accountability mechanisms, and embed monitoring, evaluation and learning as reflective processes. Documenting both successes and challenges strengthens practice, supports donor confidence and contributes to the limited evidence base on participatory advocacy.



# WHY PARTICIPATORY ADVOCACY MATTERS

Participatory advocacy is a way of creating change that includes many different people in decision-making. Unlike traditional advocacy, it involves a wider group of individuals working together to influence leaders or decision makers to solve social problems. Participatory approaches to advocacy often involve several steps such as research and analysis, strategic planning, mobilisation, action and learning and review - described as an advocacy cycle - with the learning feeding back into research and analysis.<sup>4</sup>

In participatory advocacy, children, including those with lived experience of CSEA, may engage in each phase of the advocacy cycle or contribute to different stages. In drawing on Lansdown & O’Kane’s (2014) model of participation, children’s engagement during these stages may be described as: consultative; collaborative or child-led.<sup>5</sup> The level of children’s engagement in the advocacy cycle may depend on a range of factors including:

- Resourcing and the time available and levels of interest from the children involved.
- Presumed levels of risk and uncertainty for children (often determined by those facilitating their engagement). This means that children may be invited to share their views on discrete topics associated with the advocacy issue, but it may be viewed as ‘unsafe’ for them to lead certain actions.
- Adulthood<sup>6</sup> also comes into play when determining levels and stages of engagement. It may be perceived that advocacy messages delivered by children will be taken less seriously than those delivered by adults.<sup>7</sup>

There is a general recognition amongst practitioners that participatory advocacy on CSEA often occurs under scrutiny from donors and policymakers who question whether children’s involvement changes the quality, credibility, or impact of evidence. This highlights an acknowledged tension between participation as a human-rights principle and the need to demonstrate tangible or measurable outcomes.



# KEY LEARNING ON PARTICIPATORY ADVOCACY

## Learning Point 1: Clarifying roles, consent and risks between research and advocacy

### 1.1 Pausing between phases to revisit roles and expectations

If the same children and youth are involved in both the research and advocacy phases it can be helpful to pause between these two phases to consider and reflect with child researchers on how their role will change as an advocate. Not all child researchers may want or be able to take on the role of child advocate. And child advocates should not be expected to undertake every activity involved in the advocacy process. Clear role descriptions or terms of references for child advocates should be developed and needs or capacity assessments carried out for children that are interested in taking on the role of 'advocate'. Equally, thought should be given to where adults' time and experience can best be used to support children's decision-making.

It has been noticed by practitioners that participatory research and advocacy on CSEA often engages school-based children (such as in the *Children Know Better* project) or adult survivors of childhood sexual violence. Young people currently experiencing or recently exiting sexual exploitation (the missing middle) are often excluded from participatory work due to safeguarding, liability, stigma and institutional risk aversion.

This exclusion is not only logistical but also driven by fear of harm and organisational risk management cultures. Consequently, meaningful participation of this 'missing middle' group of young people - arguably the group who hold most significant or up-to-date knowledge of CSEA - requires intentional engagement strategies (see Children Know Better Learning Brief - [Selecting and Preparing Children for Participatory Research and Advocacy on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#)).

## 1.2 Revisiting consent and risk management before public advocacy

Although designing and planning an advocacy campaign is not a public facing activity - advocating for change is a very 'public' role that can place advocates in positions where they are vulnerable to public criticism or harassment. The taboo and stigma surrounding the issue of CSEA<sup>8</sup> is a critical factor that needs to be discussed and addressed when planning an advocacy campaign. Introducing the topics of sex, sexuality and CSEA needs to be undertaken gradually and sensitively with children and young people<sup>9</sup> and the use of victim blaming language avoided.<sup>10</sup> Undertaking risk assessments with children about their concerns in taking on advocacy activities is crucial.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to revisit consent processes recognising that in participatory projects informed consent is an ongoing process and that children may consent to taking part in specific advocacy activities or events but not all. Similar conversations about consent should be revisited with parents and carers.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, ethical participatory approaches require wider support systems to be in place that recognise some participants may still be in exploitative or abusive situations (see [Guidance Note - Ethics and safeguarding in participatory approaches to research exploring child sexual exploitation and abuse and related harms with child and youth researchers](#)). Children's engagement in advocacy may be unethical if it is extractive, offers no tangible benefit, or lacks follow-up/support.

# Learning Point 2: Using children's research experience to inform advocacy planning and messaging

## 2.1 Use research findings as the foundation for advocacy planning

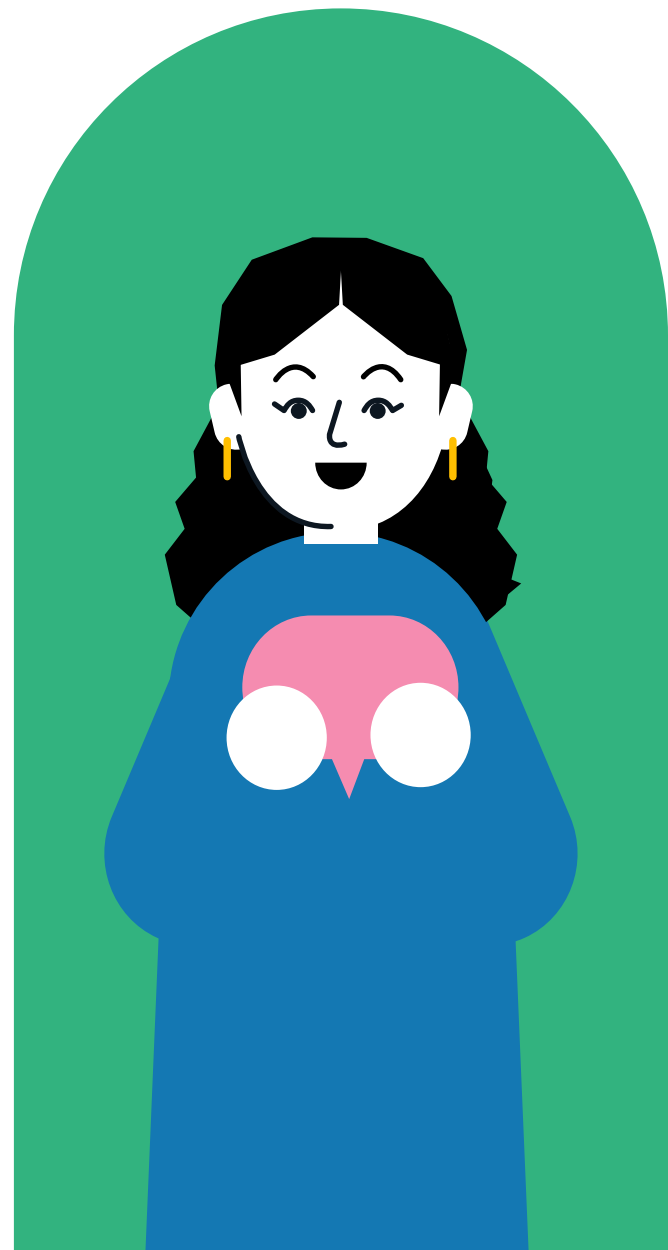
In an advocacy project the design phase is usually when the advocacy objectives, key stakeholders (advocacy targets), key messages and advocacy campaign 'products' - such as events or materials - are developed. However, when advocacy follows participatory research, many of the key ingredients to the advocacy campaign plan may have already been identified. Key findings and recommendations from the research can be prioritised by children in terms of their 'fit' with the environment for advocacy (i.e. with the help of policy analysis

by adult facilitators or NGO staff) to identify the advocacy goal or objective (the change in policy or practice being called for). In addition, advocacy targets (those who can implement the change being called for) may well have served as key informants in the research project.

## 2.2 Applying children's research skills and priorities to advocacy planning

Children's experience of reflection and analysis during the research phase can meaningfully inform subsequent advocacy planning activities, including stakeholder mapping, the use of monitoring and evaluation tools, and the identification of appropriate advocacy targets. While it is generally recommended that adult staff from facilitating organisations lead technically complex tasks such as detailed power mapping or policy reviews - given the specialist knowledge required of political systems and decision-making structures - children who have participated in research analysis often develop a strong contextual understanding of how power dynamics and policy environments affect the issues they are exploring. This understanding enables them to contribute grounded perspectives to planning discussions and to interpret mapping or targeting exercises in ways that remain closely linked to their lived realities.

'Making a change' for other children and young people is frequently a primary motivator for engagement in participatory projects. For this reason, it is critical at the outset of a participatory advocacy initiative to explore what forms of influence are realistic and achievable, and to ensure that proposed advocacy targets and decision-making processes align with children's own priorities for change. Although many projects initially focus on national-level decision makers to pursue legislative reform, experience shows that local and sub-national advocacy spaces often provide more immediate and tangible opportunities for impact, allowing children and youth to observe outcomes and experience the direct relevance of their efforts in daily life. Adult facilitators play an important supportive role in helping children identify which local or relevant decision makers hold the authority to influence the changes being sought, thereby ensuring that advocacy campaigns are directed toward appropriate and strategic audiences. Involving children in stakeholder or power-mapping exercises - at a level that is safe and developmentally appropriate - can also help them assess how comfortable they feel engaging with different audiences and whether they believe meaningful influence is possible.



Different sequencing approaches may be used in practice. For example, in the *Building Sustainable Tourism Destinations* project, children were involved in mapping stakeholders prior to collecting primary data. In contrast, the *Children Know Better* project initially committed to engaging 40 adult decision makers in each country through capacity-development and training activities, with the assumption that these advocacy targets would be identified at the start. However, reflection by project teams highlighted the importance of waiting until children had explored and defined the research topic that most interested them. Only at that stage were key stakeholders and decision makers (those with responsibilities or influence related to the children's identified issues) selected. This experience illustrates the value of allowing children's research priorities to guide the timing and focus of advocacy target identification, ensuring that advocacy efforts remain relevant, credible, and genuinely child-led while still supported by adult technical expertise.

## 2.3 Drawing on children's research and dialogue experience to refine advocacy messages

Child researchers' familiarity with research data, and how research participants (particularly adults) respond to discussion and dialogue on this topic, can be drawn on to refine messaging. For example, by using terminology on CSEA in advocacy messaging that has been used in interviews or discussions with adult decision makers. Children who have undertaken research activities will have relatively in-depth knowledge and an 'insiders' understanding of the research topic - which can be helpful in influencing decision makers. In the *Children Know Better* project, children's confidence in speaking publicly about the issue of sexual harassment was noticed by children and decision makers alike:

*Earlier, I didn't understand issues related to sexual abuse properly. Now we talk with many children. We have also achieved success in conducting FGDs with children and in speaking with stakeholders. Other child leaders have also changed - those who could not speak clearly before now express themselves very well.*

### Child Leader, Male, Bangladesh

In a realist evaluation of participatory action research (PAR) with children in Nepal working in the Adult Entertainment Industry it was found that the combination of child advocate's lived experience and research evidence (of research by children) appeared to be particularly influential with local government decision makers - where children presented their research findings as formalised recommendations for change.<sup>13</sup>

However, it is worth remembering that there is limited evidence that children are inherently more influential than adults (which highlights a key gap in evaluation evidence). Practitioners have noted that children's influence can vary by political context and alignment with decision makers' agendas - and although children often 'humanise' debates and add emotional impact to advocacy messages, this influence is inconsistent.

## 2.4 Developing evidence-backed recommendations for advocacy targets

When children are presenting their own research as part of advocacy activities, they have a deep and a unique understanding of the evidence. However, it's important to recognise the boundaries of their expertise and manage expectations of adult decision makers - both allies and advocacy targets - regarding the topics/evidence child advocates can realistically speak about. Youth advocates from the *She Leads* project reported feeling overwhelmed by the expectation to speak, as advocates, on a broad range of issues, often beyond their expertise or lived experience.

Organising validation, sense-making or reflection workshops with wider groups of children (than child advocates) to develop and explore specific advocacy recommendations (for advocacy targets) from research findings can be a helpful way to underpin advocacy 'calls to action'. If recommendations can be supported by evidence (from the participatory research project in question but also from other studies or research) they are likely to be seen as more credible by advocacy targets.

## Learning Point 3: Creating enabling and protective environments for participatory advocacy

### 3.1 Treating awareness-raising as continuous, not one-off

Within an advocacy cycle, awareness raising and mobilisation is often viewed as a distinct phase that comes after the research phase and before the advocacy actions. However, in the context of projects that involve children, and focus on sensitive/taboo subjects, awareness raising should be a continuous activity rather than a one-off 'phase' of the project.

It is worth considering a staged but regular approach to awareness raising. Initial awareness raising activities should target parents/carers and extended family, aiming to gain their consent and support for the project (and these consent discussions can be repeated when the project activities move into a new phase [see 2.2](#)). Additionally, it is important to create non-judgemental 'safe' spaces for regular conversations on the topic of CSEA and children's rights with extended family and community members to mitigate potential tensions within families and communities.

In the *Children Know Better* project, child leaders reported initial backlash from peers, relatives, community members and teachers for taking part in a project focussing on CSEA - which were often due to misunderstandings about the nature of the research project. For example, parents and carers of potential child leaders were initially concerned that their children would be taking part in 'sex education' activities rather

than research on CSEA. When parents and carers of child leaders were invited to attend awareness raising activities and training on CSEA their fears were allayed. The 'taboo' nature of projects focusing on the topic of CSEA often requires regular awareness raising activities to gradually build understanding with duty bearers and decision makers.

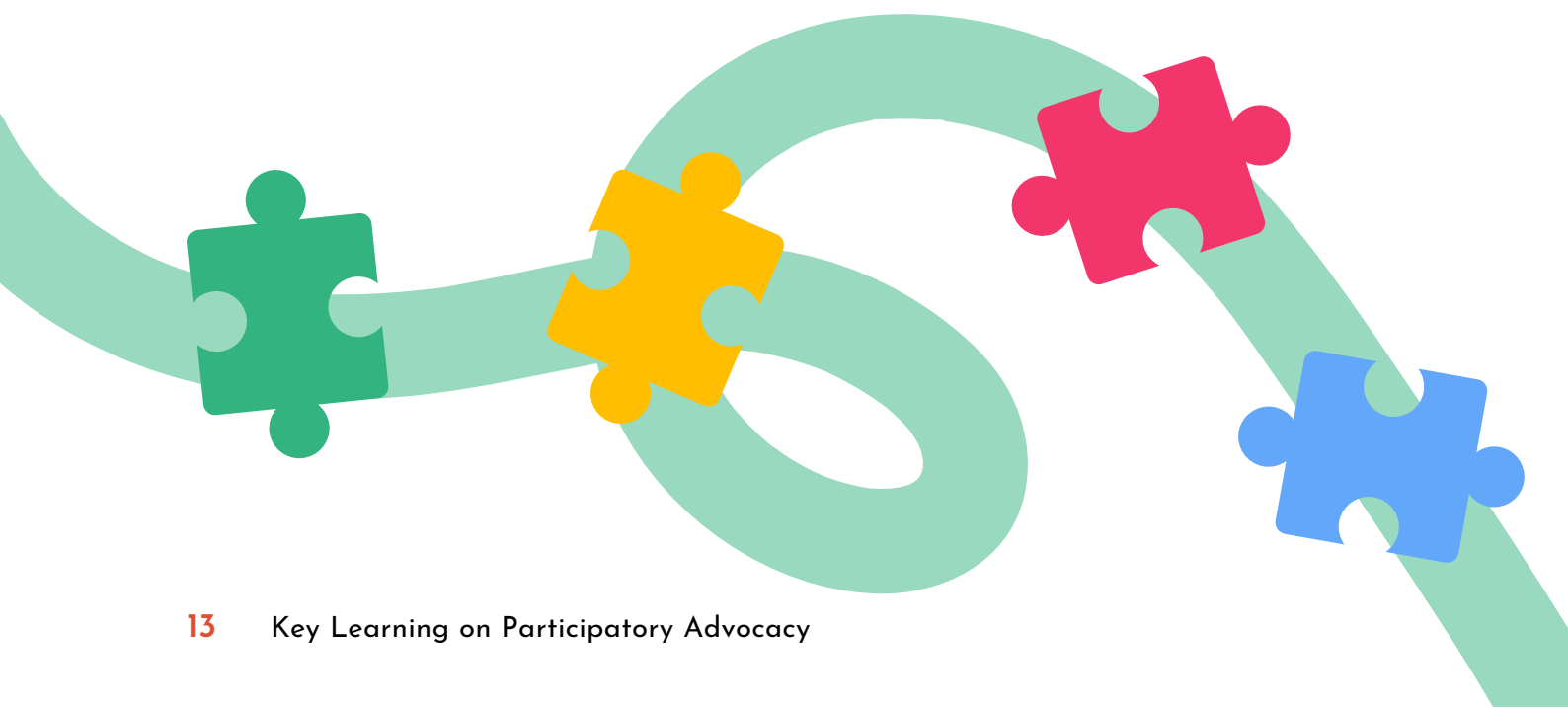
Learning from the *She Leads* programme also identified that strengthening community involvement in the programme, by engaging local leaders, parents, and community members in awareness raising efforts, may have been beneficial.

### 3.2 Identifying specialised skills and roles to support children's advocacy

In resource restricted environments, it is important to identify which tasks, decisions or roles make best use of children's perspectives, lived experiences or relationships and which can be provided by adult allies, supporters or facilitators. For example, in advocacy planning, adult advocates are best placed to research and identify who or what will have most influence over advocacy targets - and advise child advocates accordingly. In addition, practitioners have noted<sup>14</sup> that adult facilitation of youth advocates that are campaigning on CSEA requires specific skills and experience to create a safe operating environment for participatory advocacy such as:

- openness and non-judgemental approaches
- the ability to hold emotionally difficult space
- the ability to act as a protective buffer for children
- practical knowledge and experience of organisational disclosure-management processes and confidentiality

Practitioners and academics involved in learning discussions highlighted the importance of advocacy training and preparation aiming to strengthen children's own languages (terminology) rather than making children "speak like adults" and support children's own forms of organisation and leadership rather than training children to be "mini-adults".



### Actively identifying and challenging victim-blaming language and attitudes

In designing research questions and advocacy campaigns, it is particularly important to explore misconceptions, harmful attitudes and behaviours related to CSEA<sup>15</sup> that might inadvertently be held by both adult facilitators and children and youth to ensure that victim blaming language and communication is not incorporated into advocacy messaging and materials.

Victim-blaming is any language or behaviour that implies (whether intentionally or unintentionally) that a person is partially or wholly responsible for abuse that has happened to them. It is harmful and can wrongfully place responsibility, shame or blame onto a victim, making them feel that they are complicit or responsible for the harm they have experienced.

See ECPAT International's [Guiding Principles for Preventing Victim Blaming](#).



## 3.3 Strengthening advocacy through allies and partnerships

Mobilisation means 'bringing others with you' to support the central cause or issue. 'Others' may be other children and youth, parents/carers of children engaged in Participatory Action Research, community members or other organisations working locally on similar topics (who could be considered 'allies' in an advocacy campaign).

In the *She Leads* programme, joint advocacy was identified as a key recommendation in the evaluation for how girls and young women's voices could be amplified. It was suggested that implementing partners map and identify like-minded Civil Society Organisations who are also working to support girls and women in Africa and engage in joint advocacy at the regional and global level to build and sustain pressure. It was also noted that joint efforts may lead to new ideas, levers and resources.<sup>16</sup>

## 3.4 Addressing the tensions around personal testimonies

There is often a pressure on children who are delivering advocacy messages to share their personal story of victimhood (personal testimonies) which can be a re-victimising and disempowering experience for many children so is generally avoided by practitioners. Advocacy campaigns based on pity or spectacle were strongly criticised by practitioners in learning discussions and viewed as 'performative' rather than participatory. This tension around the kind of influence children have is widely acknowledged in participatory advocacy with children:

*...some [advocacy targets] might be moved by children emotionally just because they hear it rationally from adult advocates and then actually to hear children stand up and say "this is negatively affecting my life, this policy you've got." I think it can be the catalyst that works for some adults, but not all.*

### Participant in learning discussion

Academics and practitioners have concluded that one compromise is to 'anonymise' personal testimonies from children. This can be achieved through film or audio accounts - although it is crucial that ethical principles are used in all storytelling. In addition, children's testimonies should not form the basis of advocacy messaging but should be used to illustrate an advocacy message. When advocacy messages are based on research findings - recommendations that link evidence to advocacy can be very effective. An evaluation of participatory advocacy on children's work in the adult entertainment sector in Nepal found that decision makers found it hard to treat children as a homogenous group and disregard their views when children were representing other child workers and they targeted specific decision makers with specific recommendations for action.<sup>17</sup>

## Learning Point 4: Allowing time for advocacy action, follow-up, and accountability

### 4.1 Planning long-term follow-up on commitments

At advocacy events, advocacy targets often make public commitments to 'calls for action' or recommendations from children and young people. These commitments should be documented carefully and strategies developed to track and follow-up on any commitments made - so that decision makers are held to account.<sup>18</sup> As policy and systems change takes years to happen, participatory advocacy projects should complement advocacy activities of implementing partners rather than being 'stand-alone' projects. This allows implementing partners to track and follow-up on decision makers' commitments to children and to incorporate learning from children's advocacy into long-term advocacy strategies. Advocacy campaigns typically need at least five years, with repeated campaign cycles, before policy or system changes can realistically be expected.

## 4.2 Recognising and strengthening children's leadership skills

Evidence from evaluations of Participatory Action Research indicates that children's confidence and leadership skills significantly increase because of their engagement in the research process. Although delays in the *Children Know Better* project reduced the time allocated for implementing advocacy action to just three months, in some cases child researchers had already taken the initiative to talk to community members about what they had learned, this gave them a new status in the community as child/youth leaders or champions:

*I have now developed a different identity in the area. In my area, many children of my age are given child marriages but by joining this work, my family and the people of my area also respect me as a child leader. My family does not want me to get married as a child.*

Child Leader, Female, Bangladesh

This points to the value of participatory action research processes where the project doesn't just end with a research report, but where there are opportunities for children to start to address what their findings uncovered with the aim of bringing about positive change. Given children may doubt that decision makers will listen to them, the parallel work with decision makers to prepare them for intergenerational dialogue becomes even more significant.<sup>19</sup> This aligns with learning from other projects that while it may not be necessary for children and youth who wish to lead and drive advocacy activities to undertake primary research, having some connection to this phase can help to motivate and drive advocacy around these issues.<sup>20</sup>

## Learning Point 5: Using monitoring, evaluation and learning to strengthen practice

### 5.1 Using MEL as a reflective learning process, not only reporting

In ECPAT International's literature review of participatory advocacy on the topic of CSEA it was found that there was very limited documentation of learning on the advocacy process (particularly around advocacy planning, mobilisation and action) and almost no evaluation of participatory advocacy on this topic (with one exception).<sup>21</sup> When learning on an innovative and evolving area of practice is not documented it is likely that those facilitating participatory approaches will not refine or progress their practices. In addition, a lack of evaluation evidence of participatory approaches - in particular, evidence highlighting the specific value of participatory advocacy - makes it harder to promote participatory approaches to key stakeholders such as donors.

As part of the *Children Know Better* project, steps were taken to document learning as it occurred. This included a base-line, mid-line and end-line survey with child researchers, youth facilitators and adult decision makers, regular project updates which captured learning and a three-day learning and reflection workshop in each country mid-way through the project that brought together the implementing partner staff, child leaders, youth facilitators and staff from ECPAT International to reflect on what was working, what wasn't and to explore solutions. At the end of the project a final evaluation was commissioned to undertake outcome harvesting of the project and two learning discussions held with practitioners and academics in different regions. Using a mix of learning and evaluation activities allowed staff from implementing partners, ECPAT International and other expert practitioners and academics to reflect on this innovative area of work and to document learning for different audiences.

Practitioners recommended centring children's own experiences and highlighted that success is not only about policy outcomes, the importance of children's dignity, recognition and agency should not be forgotten. Useful evaluation methods included collective storytelling methods<sup>22</sup> such as 'river of life' or 'most significant change' and realist evaluation or outcomes harvesting (see Positive Outcomes Framework).<sup>23</sup>

## 5.2 Creating safe spaces to document challenges as well as successes

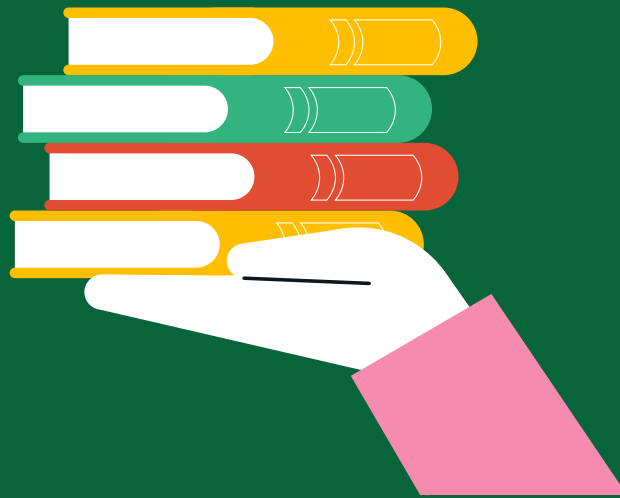
Project updates from implementing partners in the *Children Know Better* project were written in a way that may be expected in traditional projects - with a focus on descriptions of activities, numbers of those involved etc. When implementing partners are asked to complete mid-project reports they may feel they must report on the 'wins' of the project and may feel less able to report on the challenges or things that have not gone to plan. While this level of reporting is necessary and useful, in participatory action research projects there should be other opportunities, and encouragement to talk through the tensions and complexities experienced rather than being asked to provide a written report. If done through a supportive conversation, this may provide opportunities for the listener to ask for further detail 'in the moment' improving the quality of learning and enabling the development of anonymous case studies and scenarios that can be used in future training and drawn on when designing new projects.





## CONCLUSION

Participatory advocacy on CSEA is most effective when it is understood as an ongoing, relational process rather than a single campaign or event. The learning presented in this brief highlights that meaningful participation depends on intentional pacing between research and advocacy, revisiting consent and risk assessment, and strong facilitation that protects children's wellbeing alongside amplifying their voices. When children's research experiences are recognised as a source of knowledge and credibility - and are supported by adult technical expertise and wider evidence - advocacy efforts can remain both child-led and strategically grounded. Creating enabling environments through sustained awareness-raising, partnerships with allies and intergenerational dialogue further reduces stigma and distributes responsibility for change beyond individual child advocates. Equally, realistic timelines, accountability mechanisms and reflective monitoring and evaluation are essential to ensure that advocacy commitments are followed through and that learning informs future practice. Together, these elements reinforce that participatory advocacy is not only about influencing policy or practice, but also about strengthening children's confidence, leadership and agency while contributing to longer-term systemic change in the prevention and response to CSEA and related harms.



## USEFUL RESOURCES

- [Myths and Misconceptions about CSEA](#) ECPAT International (2025)
- [Approaches for Youth Engagement in Advocacy on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#) ECPAT International (2025)
- [Tools for Participatory Advocacy](#) ECPAT International (2025)
- [Core Component: Creating a Safe Environment](#) ECPAT International (2025)
- [Shifting the Narrative on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Guiding Principles on Victim Blaming Language, Communication and Behaviours.](#) ECPAT International (2025)
- [GREATER Adult Support for Meaningful Child Participation in Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.](#) ECPAT International (2025)
- [A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children's Participation: Introduction.](#) Booklet 1. Gerison Lansdown and Claire O' Kane, Save the Children (2014)
- [Participatory Advocacy: A Toolkit for VSO Staff, Volunteers and Partners.](#) J Cox, VSO (2012)

# ENDNOTES

1. ECPAT International. (2025) [Approaches for Youth Engagement in Advocacy on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#)
2. Cody C., and Veitch., H. (2024) [A review of existing approaches to child and youth informed participatory advocacy on child sexual exploitation](#)
3. See Useful Resources on the final page of this learning brief
4. See Cox, J. (2012). [Participatory Advocacy: A Toolkit for VSO Staff, Volunteers and Partners](#). VSO.
5. See Lansdown G. and O' Kane, C. (2014). [A toolkit for monitoring and evaluation children's participation: Introduction. Booklet 1](#). Save the Children.
6. Refers to oppressive forms of adults' power over children. See ECPAT International's [GREATER model](#).
7. See more on adultism in Children Know Better Learning Brief: [Intergenerational dialogue on child sexual exploitation and abuse and related harms - the role of preparatory work](#).
8. See [Myths and Misconceptions about CSEA](#)
9. See Tool 3 Group Discussion: What is Sexual Violence and Tool 4: Scenario Cards on Sexual Violence in [Tools for Participatory Advocacy](#) ECPAT International (2025)
10. See box below and [Guiding Principles on Preventing Victim-Blaming Language, Communication and Behaviour](#). ECPAT International (2025)
11. See ECPAT International (2025) [Core Component: Creating a Safe Environment](#) for examples of activities that can facilitate these discussions.
12. See Children Know Better Learning Brief: [Intergenerational dialogue on child sexual exploitation and abuse and related harms - the role of preparatory work](#)
13. See Veitch, H. in Apgar, M. et al. (2024) [Evaluating CLARISSA: Evidence, Learning, and Practice, CLARISSA Research and Evidence Paper 13](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. See Section 4: Findings from an Evaluation of Child-Led Advocacy in CLARISSA
14. From learning discussions with practitioners held as part of the Children Know Better evaluation
15. See Myths and Misconceptions about CSEA <https://ecpat.org/myths/>
16. Move on Afrika Ltd (2023) Mid-term evaluation report for the Pan African She Leads Programme
17. Veitch, H. in Apgar, M. et al. (2024) [Evaluating CLARISSA: Evidence, Learning, and Practice, CLARISSA Research and Evidence Paper 13](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. See Section 4: Findings from an Evaluation of Child-Led Advocacy in CLARISSA
18. Recommendation from She Leads initiative - see Move on Afrika Ltd (2023) Mid-term evaluation report for the Pan African She Leads Program. Also, see 'Learning and Review' section of ECPAT International resource: [Approaches to Youth Engagement in Advocacy on CSEA](#) (2025) for guidance on MEL for participatory advocacy

19. See Children Know Better Learning Brief: [Intergenerational dialogue on child sexual exploitation and abuse and related harms - the role of preparatory work](#)
20. Cody, C. and Veitch, H., (2024) [A Review of Existing Approaches to Child and Youth Informed Participatory Advocacy on Child Sexual Exploitation](#), ECPAT International
21. Veitch, H. in Apgar, M. et al. (2024) [Evaluating CLARISSA: Evidence, Learning, and Practice, CLARISSA Research and Evidence Paper 13](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. See Section 4: Findings from an Evaluation of Child-Led Advocacy in CLARISSA
22. From learning discussions held with practitioners as part of the Children Know Better evaluation.
23. Hynes P, Connolly H. and Durán L. (2022). [Creating Stable Futures: Human Trafficking, Participation and Outcomes for Children](#). ECPAT UK.



328/1 Phaya Thai Road, Ratchathewi, Bangkok, 10400, Thailand  
Telephone: +662 215 3388 | Fax: +662 215 8272  
Email: [info@ecpat.org](mailto:info@ecpat.org) | Website: [www.ecpat.org](http://www.ecpat.org)