



# From Participation TO INFLUENCE

Exploring the Value of Children's  
Participation in Research and  
Advocacy on Child Sexual  
Exploitation and Abuse

## Acknowledgements

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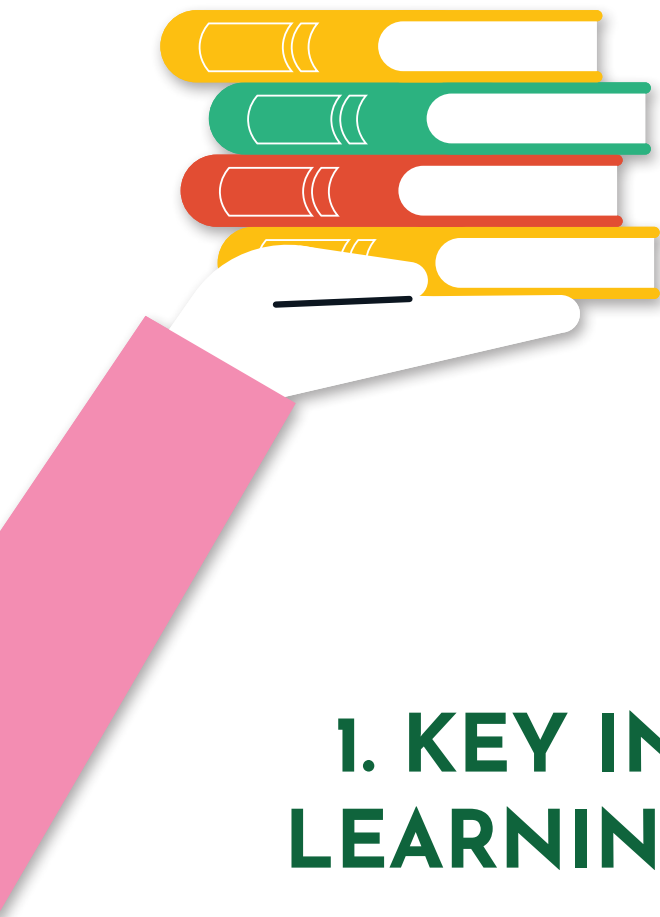
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# 1. KEY INSIGHTS FROM LEARNING DISCUSSIONS

- **Participation adds methodological as well as ethical value:** Participatory approaches are often justified on rights-based grounds; however, discussions highlighted that children and youth's involvement can also strengthen the relevance, credibility and depth of research and advocacy by shaping what questions are asked, how issues are understood and how messages are framed.
- **Children's lived experience influences interpretation, not only data collection:** Children and youth are rarely involved in research analysis, yet participants noted that this is where interpretive power sits. Their involvement in validating or analysing findings can shift how experiences of CSEA are understood and prevent adult assumptions from shaping conclusions.
- **Advocacy messages grounded in collective experience carry greater legitimacy:** Participatory research can enable children and youth to speak not only from personal experience but on behalf of a wider peer group. This can strengthen advocacy messages by positioning children and youth as informed contributors rather than symbolic representatives.
- **Participatory work supports organisational learning as well as external influence:** Engaging children and youth in research and advocacy processes can change how organisations design programmes, communicate with children and integrate children's views into decision-making, contributing to more responsive and contextually grounded practice over time.

- **Target children's involvement and adult support where it adds most value:** Given the limited time and resources typically available for participatory work on CSEA, children and youth cannot be involved in every stage of research or advocacy processes. Discussions highlighted the importance of engaging children in targeted moments where decision-making power sits, with adult facilitators taking on supportive technical or follow-up roles to ensure participation remains meaningful rather than symbolic.
- **The impact of participation is often incremental and relational:** Children and youth's influence may be reflected in gradual shifts in how adults listen, how institutions respond or how organisational practices evolve, rather than in immediate policy change. Monitoring and evaluation approaches should therefore focus on tracing contribution over time.
- **Resource constraints shape who is able to participate:** Logistical considerations such as compensation, transport or connectivity can determine which children and youth are able to take part in participatory processes. Without explicit resourcing, participatory work risks reinforcing existing inequalities between children.
- **Participation can be framed to donors as an investment in effectiveness:** Practitioners may wish to present participatory approaches not only as a rights-based obligation but as a means of improving the accuracy of research findings, strengthening the legitimacy of advocacy messages, and supporting organisational learning to enhance programme relevance over time.





## 2. INTRODUCTION

**Background:** This learning report documents the key learning from two online learning discussions held with 10 practitioners, academics and advocates in January and February 2026 and co-ordinated by ECPAT International and Children Unite. Participants were drawn from ECPAT International’s Expert Advisory Group on Child Participation and all had direct experience of using participatory approaches with children and youth - most participants also had experience of participatory work on the topic of CSEA and related harms. The first discussion was timed to allow participants from Europe, Africa and South Asia (held in English language) to come together and the second to involve participants from Latin America (held in Spanish language). Discussions were recorded and transcribed; and translated where necessary. Names of participants or the organisations they represented have not been used in the write-up of the discussions to allow participants to express their views more freely.

**Rationale:** Although there is much rhetoric on the importance of ‘children’s participation’ in research and advocacy to better understand and address child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA), this is not supported by an investment in participatory approaches or evaluation of their impact. Children’s participatory rights - including the right to be heard, and to freedom of expression, association and thought - are widely recognised in principle. In practice, however, these rights are often perceived as being in tension with protection rights. In contexts involving children and youth with lived experience of CSEA, protection concerns frequently take precedence, which can limit opportunities for meaningful participation. In addition, structural factors such as adultism, colonial legacies and resource constraints mean that those promoting participatory approaches are often required to justify the value of children’s participation, rather than participatory approaches being assumed as integral to quality practice.

This raises important questions about what is meant by the “value” of participatory work, particularly in relation to its contribution and impact. A central question underpinning the learning discussions was therefore: what difference does it make when children and young people are directly involved in research and advocacy on CSEA, compared to when these processes are led solely by adults? While it is neither feasible nor appropriate to establish comparative “control” groups to test this question empirically, the discussions sought to draw on the experience of practitioners, researchers and advocates to reflect on the distinctive contributions participatory approaches may offer.

**Methods:** Discussions were an exercise in collective learning rather than evaluation of participatory work. Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and learning based on their experiences of participatory work - and questions were specifically asked about the negatives as well as the positives of participatory approaches in order to highlight nuanced insights that are often absent from formal evaluation processes.

**Audience:** The primary intended audience for the resulting learning is practitioners and civil society organisations who are implementing participatory research and advocacy initiatives on CSEA. Although insights may also be relevant to funders, academics and policy actors, this learning report is framed to support those responsible for day-to-day programme design and delivery, with a view to strengthening the quality of participatory practice.

**Scope:** The scope of the discussion - and consequently this report - is limited to participatory research and participatory advocacy on CSEA - notably, that involves children and youth with lived experiences of CSEA. Although safeguarding and ethical practice were recognised throughout the discussion as critical requirements for any participatory work on CSEA, these topics were not examined in depth within this forum. Separate guidance and resources are being developed by ECPAT International to address safeguarding and ethics for participatory work on CSEA. This report therefore concentrates on questions of purpose, value and application of participatory approaches on CSEA, rather than exploring protection and risk management issues.





### 3. UNDERSTANDING “VALUE” IN PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

The starting point for both learning discussions was the concept of “value.” Participants observed that it often appears in proposals and reports yet is rarely defined in practical terms. In discussions, value was described as operating across at least three overlapping areas: a) value for the children and youth involved, b) value for the quality and credibility of research or advocacy, and c) value for organisational learning and professional practice. There is significant data on the value of participatory approaches for the children and youth involved (a). However, the other dimensions of value have been explored less and this is one of the reasons the learning discussions were initiated. As one participant noted, *“We keep saying it adds value, but sometimes we don’t say to whom, or how.”*

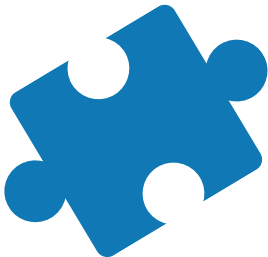
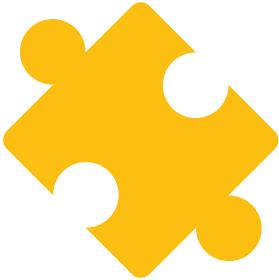
The lack of understanding of the value of participatory approaches connects to a key tension between ‘children’s participation’ as a **right** and ‘children’s participation’ as a **method**. Although it is clearly recognised by practitioners that children have a right to be heard in matters that affect them, at the same time, there is also pressure - from donors in particular - to prove that involving children makes projects more effective or successful. There is an assumption that hasn’t really been tested that participatory approaches lead to better data, stronger messages or more influence with decision makers. Yet there is resistance to the idea that children’s engagement should be reduced to a technical input or performance indicator. One participant summarised this contradiction simply: *“We do this because it’s right - and then we’re asked to show it’s effective.”*

A third strand of the discussion focused on the contextual and relational nature of value as participatory work does not exist in isolation. It is shaped by adult attitudes toward children, cultural norms around sexuality and childhood, and the time and resources allocated to the process. Funding realities were mentioned repeatedly. Participatory approaches are encouraged in principle but under-resourced in practice, leading to rushed preparation and limited follow-up. This shows that participatory approaches only work well when the right conditions are in place.

The two discussions, consequently, focused on “value” in terms of b) value for the quality and credibility of research or advocacy, and c) value for organisational learning and professional practice although, in practice, of course, the value for children and youth involved was intertwined with the value for the other dimensions.

**Box - Key Tension:  
Rights or Results?**

Children’s participation can easily be justified on ethical grounds or ‘as a right’, yet in practice, organisations are still expected to demonstrate tangible outcomes in order to secure support and funding.





## 4. PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH: WHERE AND WHEN CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT ADDS MOST VALUE

Discussion focused on peer-to-peer research on the topic of CSEA and related harms, where children or youth (both research participants and researchers) have lived experience of the research topic. Participatory research was characterised as children and youth taking on the role of researcher and undertaking research activities with their peers. The following key points were raised from learning discussions.

### 4.1 The value of shared experiences: Building trust & adding depth

Participants consistently described the added depth that peer researchers can bring. When children interview other children with similar lived experiences, trust often forms more quickly and conversations move beyond structured questions. One participant described life-story interviews with children working in the adult entertainment sector, conducted by both adults and youth researchers. The difference, they explained, 'was not simply tone but depth.'

*"The peer interviews became shared storytelling. It wasn't 'question and answer'. It was, 'this happened to me too.'"*

When children see their situation reflected in the interviewer, research can feel less extractive and more relational. Trust formed particularly quickly where children already knew each other or shared experiences of exploitation or stigma. Participants also highlighted the impact on children themselves. Peer research strengthened children's solidarity and motivation to advocate for change. Research spaces often became spaces of connection. As one participant reflected:

*"For them it wasn't only about collecting information. It was about belonging."*

Although it is worth noting that familiarity can also act as a barrier, as some children may feel what they share is less likely to stay confidential.

## 4.2 Framing research questions and language

Participants stressed the value of involving children and youth in shaping research questions - as bringing nuance that adults often miss, particularly around terminology:

*"Children always have a difference and nuance that adult researchers miss about what to ask."*

Advisory panels of children and youth can be used to test draft questions with them, identifying language that feels stigmatising, confusing or irrelevant. Deciding *"what should we be asking and how should we be asking it?"* was described as a strong use of children's time, especially when resources are limited. When there is limited time or resources, engaging children and youth in framing and prioritisation can help ensure research reflects their realities rather than adult assumptions.

### **Key Question: Different knowledge or the same knowledge differently told?**

Participants raised a key question for participatory research with children: "Do children produce different knowledge, or just reproduce the same knowledge in different ways?" While there was no time for a full discussion, the predominant position was that children produce different knowledge. Children's lived experience shapes what is asked, what is prioritised and how experiences are understood, influencing both data collection and analysis.

## 4.3 Engaging children in analysis: Where research power sits

Children are rarely involved in data analysis, often due to concerns about children's capacity to explore positionality, reflexivity and to question their own assumptions. However, several participants argued that analysis is precisely where children's involvement matters most because this is where interpretive power sits:

*"It's the most critical bit - if only one aspect of research could involve children, I'd choose analysis."*

Examples were shared of using games and visual tools to demystify the analysis process for children. In one example where youth researchers undertook coding, children highlighted the importance of "normality" for young survivors - a theme adult researchers had not identified. Participants also described involving children and youth in validating or sense-checking initial findings, which sometimes shifted interpretation and unpacked overlooked issues. Discussion shifted the focus from whether children are capable of analysis to whether excluding them from a key 'site of power' for research re-centres adult interpretations and authority in the research process - therefore counteracting 'participatory' processes.

### Key Learning: Identifying Sites of Power

Most guidelines or principles for participatory approaches are working to the 'ideal' situation. However, when discussing the reality of 'limited time and funds' for implementing participatory approaches it was useful to ask 'where is the power based in this project? When do key decisions get made? Ensuring that children and youth are engaged in 'sites of power' for the project can help prioritise their involvement - making it more intentional.



## 4.4 Selective engagement across the research cycle

Participants were clear that children cannot and should not be expected to do everything. They cannot be trained indefinitely or manage all technical tasks. A key question raised was: *“Where in the project cycle is it most valuable to engage children?”* Tasks involving decision-making power - shaping research questions or contributing to analysis - were seen as high-value. More technical or time-consuming tasks, such as transcription or report writing, can be undertaken by adults without weakening participation.

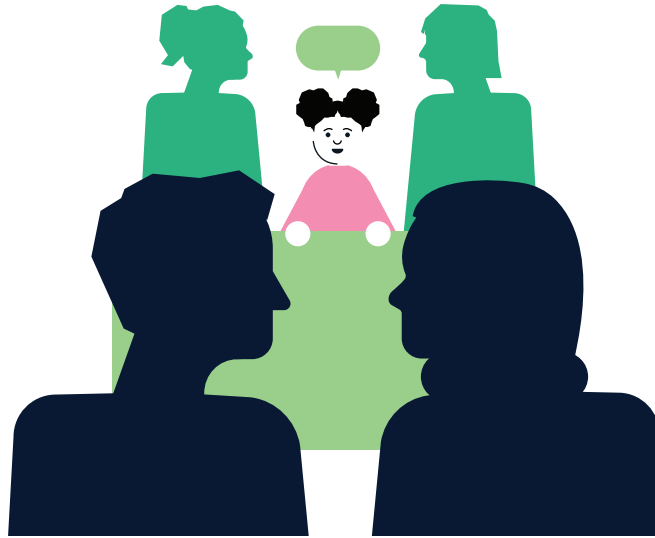
## 4.5 Long-term engagement

Participants highlighted that participatory research is strongest when it grows from longer-term engagement activities with children and youth: *“When it comes from the children themselves, it’s already based on their priorities.”*

Long-term relationships allow trust to develop and shared ways of working to evolve. In contrast, when research is a one-off or siloed from other work, it can feel less relevant. Participants noted that significant time must then be spent building trust, otherwise participation work risks becoming superficial and tokenistic.

Participants repeatedly returned to the risk of overburdening children in the name of ‘participation’: *“Children can’t do everything.”* Children often have caring duties, school commitments or paid work. One participant shared that a donor would not allow compensation for child researchers that were working children, even though children were losing income, creating an ethical dilemma for the team. The discussion focused on balancing meaningful participation with fairness and care.





## 5. PARTICIPATORY ADVOCACY

Participants began by distinguishing between tokenistic involvement and participatory advocacy. In many contexts, children's participation in advocacy on CSEA has been limited to the final stage of a campaign, where they are invited to share personal testimony as a form of "performance." Participants were clear that this is not participatory advocacy. Child- or youth-driven advocacy involves children at each stage of the advocacy cycle - from identifying priorities and shaping messages to engaging decision makers and evaluating outcomes.

### 5.1 Where and when participatory advocacy adds value

#### Lived experience, risk and representation

Because of the stigma surrounding CSEA, particularly social norms linked to victim blaming, there is often reluctance to involve children with lived experience in public advocacy. Participants asked whether it is always necessary, or appropriate, for children directly affected to deliver advocacy messages. Some suggested that adult survivors of childhood exploitation can provide powerful testimony without exposing children to immediate risk. However, others highlighted important limitations. As one participant reflected:

*"An adult can speak about their childhood, but we don't know if that is the same as accessing the current experience of a child."*

Participants described the involvement of adult survivors as a practical and ethical compromise rather than a full replacement. Adults' memories are shaped by time, distance and hindsight, and may not fully reflect the realities facing children now. The group ultimately agreed that involving children with lived experience is not inherently unethical or re-victimising, provided safeguards are in place and children retain control over what they share. Advocacy framed around solutions and recommendations - rather than detailed personal disclosure - was seen as more protective and empowering.

## Authenticity and the humanisation of policy

Across both discussions, participants described how advocacy messages delivered by children often appear "stronger." When those most affected speak directly, there is emotional resonance and authenticity. One participant explained:

*"With the human in front of them, telling what actually happened, they [decision makers] can say – yes, it happened to these young people too. I think that's what really works."*

Hearing directly from children was described as humanising policy debates. Abstract conversations about systems, legislation or budgets become tangible when linked to lived experience. Participants suggested that this can make it harder for decision makers to distance themselves from the issue or treat children as a homogenised group. At the same time, participants emphasised that strength does not depend only on individual testimony. Advocacy grounded in collective experience was seen as more credible and harder to dismiss.

## Collective voice, research and credibility

Participants highlighted that advocacy is particularly powerful when it is clear that a wider group of children has been consulted. When children and youth have undertaken participatory research and can speak with authority about findings from their peers, their messages carry additional weight.

In these cases, children are not presented as isolated victims but as representatives. Advocacy messages rooted in recommendations from a broad group of children were described as more strategic and influential. Anonymised storytelling that illustrates a wider pattern, rather than focusing on one child's trauma, was also seen as strengthening calls to action while reducing personal risk.

## Context matters: Local spaces and dialogue

Participants identified local and community-based spaces as particularly effective settings for children's advocacy. When advocacy targets local decision makers, the issues discussed often directly affect both children's daily lives and the responsibilities of those in power.

Participants observed that adults' perceptions of children's capacities frequently shift when they witness children and youth speaking confidently in leadership roles. One participant reflected:

| *"When adults see them leading, it challenges the idea that children don't understand."*

Dialogue-based approaches were contrasted with one-off, high-level events that can feel performative or tokenistic. These events can also easily be co-opted by the government or other influential actors. Advocacy was described as more effective when children engage in meaningful dialogue with decision makers or share experiences together, such as walking through a neighbourhood to identify safety concerns. These formats move beyond symbolic participation and create space for shared understanding.

## Prepared decision makers and strategic support

The effectiveness of children's advocacy was also linked to the preparedness of decision makers. Participants noted that advocacy is more impactful when decision makers have already engaged in reflection on social norms related to CSEA, including adultism and biases about children's competence. Without this groundwork, children's contributions may be dismissed.

The role of facilitating organisations was described as critical. Organisations with advocacy experience are more likely to have mapped stakeholders, understood policy processes and identified strategic entry points. In these contexts, children's advocacy can complement adult-led strategies rather than being isolated from them. As one participant put it:

| *"Children's advocacy works best when it's not standing alone, but connected to a wider strategy."*



## Regional pathways into advocacy

Participants from Latin America emphasised that children's participation often begins outside formal institutions. Engagement frequently emerges from community-based and artistic spaces. Street movements, music, protest and grassroots organising were described as common entry points for youth involvement, which may later transition into formal advocacy arenas.

This contrasted with perceptions that in some European contexts, participation may be more likely to begin within institutional structures such as youth councils or advisory boards. As one participant from Latin America explained:

*"Here participation began in the community, in art, in the street - not in parliament or boards."*

Participants agreed that effective participatory advocacy must reflect local pathways and cultural context. Strategies that are influential in one region may not translate directly to another.

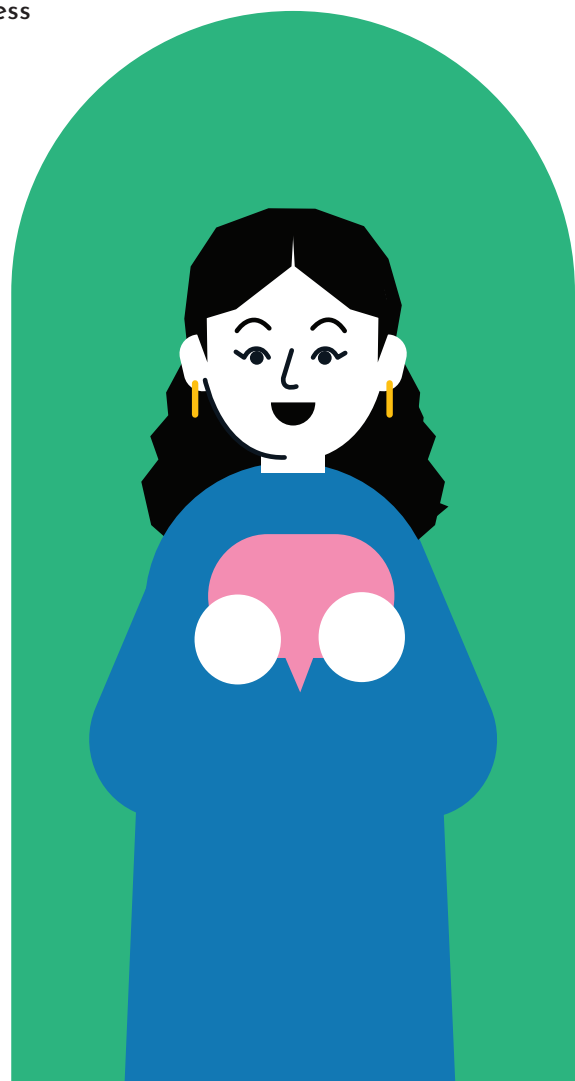
## 5.2 Contexts where children's advocacy is less effective or risky

Participants from both discussions stressed that the effectiveness of children's advocacy depends heavily on the context in which it takes place. Preparation and confidence on the part of children are not enough if the audience is not willing to listen seriously.

### Audience receptiveness and adult willingness to listen

Participants shared contrasting examples of officials' reactions to children's advocacy. In some cases, decision makers engaged seriously, asked questions and treated children as legitimate contributors. In other cases, children and youth were applauded politely but not genuinely heard. As one participant described:

*"Some listened and asked questions; others were on their phones and just clapped and said 'how cute' at the end."*



This highlighted that influence depends not only on how well children and youth are prepared, but on whether adults are willing to treat them as advocates rather than symbolic figures. Several participants also noted that adults are more likely to be influenced when children and youth say something they already agree with. Although it was acknowledged that when any advocate (child or adult) challenges dominant views or raises uncomfortable issues, they are less likely to be heard. Consequently, this raises questions about whether efforts should focus on preparing adults or whether decision makers may find it harder to dismiss advocates with lived experience that is backed up by research evidence (a combination of participatory research and advocacy).

## Political climate, hierarchies and exclusion from formal spaces

Many of the conditions that make advocacy difficult for adults - such as hostile political environments - also limit children's influence. However, children and youth face additional structural barriers. In most societies, children are excluded from formal political participation. They cannot vote and are often expected to remain in school rather than engage in public debate or activism.

Participants noted that formal or highly hierarchical environments are often not conducive to children's advocacy. These spaces reinforce adult authority and institutional language that can marginalise children's voices. Children and youth advocacy by its nature challenges adult-centric and sometimes colonial assumptions about legitimacy, leadership and communication. Children are often seen as speaking only for themselves rather than representing a wider group. Their language and forms of expression may not match institutional expectations, which can reduce how seriously they are taken.

Indigenous and migrant children were identified as facing additional barriers, especially in countries where anti-immigration and anti-youth rhetoric is strong. In these contexts, children may be doubly marginalised both as children and as members of communities that are already excluded.



## Taboos, backlash and self-censorship

Participants from Latin America emphasised that sexuality and gender remain highly taboo subjects in many settings, creating further obstacles to advocacy on CSEA. In some contexts, parents refuse consent for children to participate in advocacy, or insist on remaining present during discussions, which can limit open dialogue. There is also significant political and religious backlash against what is labelled as “gender ideology” in parts of the region. Participants described how this backlash creates fear among institutions and organisations, shaping advocacy strategies in cautious or self-censoring ways. These dynamics can reduce both children’s willingness to speak openly and institutions’ readiness to listen.

## Risks of pity-based or extractive messaging

Participants also discussed the risk that advocacy campaigns can become extractive when children are included primarily for visibility. Campaigns that rely on pity or spectacle were described as ethically uncomfortable. While emotional stories can move audiences, framing children mainly as objects of sympathy risks reinforcing passive or victim identities. As one participant reflected:

*“Hearing a real human story moves people much more than technical language - but I don’t like campaigns based on pity.”*

The discussion highlighted the need to balance emotional impact with dignity, agency and dialogue.





## 6. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

### 6.1 Ethical risks, emotional burden and safeguarding

Any research or advocacy on the topic of CSEA needs to address the fact that sexuality and sexual abuse and exploitation are taboo topics for most societies and considered inappropriate topics for children to be discussing publicly - either in research or advocacy. Consequently, stigma and discrimination surround the topic of CSEA, and in countries where LGBTQI groups and individuals are criminalised, open discussion can place discussants at risk of violence and reprisals. In addition, when undertaking participatory approaches with children and youth who have lived experiences of CSEA, re-victimisation or triggering is a significant concern. Although learning discussions purposefully avoided discussing 'ethics and safeguarding' (as separate learning is being produced by ECPAT International), these issues were raised by participants who agreed that meaningful participation requires significant support for ethics and safeguarding.

In particular, the high likelihood of disclosures of sexual abuse and exploitation during research and advocacy activities means that safeguarding procedures and support need to be in place before those activities begin.

*"When you open spaces to talk about rights or violence, cases will appear - the issue is not if, but whether we are prepared."*

To counter the 'emotional burden' children and youth often carry when their peers disclose abuse or talk about painful experiences, wellbeing mechanisms also need to be in place for children and youth undertaking research or advocacy activities on the topic of CSEA.

## 6.2 Role of adult allies and facilitators

Although the role of adult allies and facilitators was raised by participants when discussing advocacy more than research, participants were clear that staff from organisations facilitating participatory approaches have a crucial and ongoing role.

**Strategic preparation and use of adult knowledge:** For participatory advocacy, adults' understanding of what works should be actively used to strengthen children's campaigns. Participants described several ways this can happen: conducting policy reviews or stakeholder mapping to understand where influence is possible; identifying key structures, processes or decision-making moments where children's recommendations should be presented; and supporting children to frame clear calls to action. Adult facilitators were seen as responsible for ensuring that advocacy is strategically targeted rather than symbolic. Children should not have to navigate complex policy systems alone.

**Protecting children from responsibility for outcomes:** Participants emphasised that policy change is often slow and uncertain. Children should not be held responsible for whether their research findings or advocacy campaign leads to immediate results. Research and advocacy campaigns involving children should be embedded within longer-term programmes run by organisations that continue engagement with decision makers beyond a single event or moment. Protecting children from the emotional burden of outcomes was described as part of ethical facilitation. Adults should carry the responsibility for disseminating findings, sustaining advocacy efforts and managing expectations.

**Creating a culture of openness and reflection:** Adult facilitators must also reflect on their own attitudes and biases. Participants stressed that staff may need to undertake similar reflective processes as decision makers, examining assumptions about children's competence and harmful social norms related to CSEA, including victim-blaming language or behaviour.

Creating a culture of openness means being prepared to engage respectfully with children's forms of expression and ways of working, even when they differ from adult norms. Facilitators play a key role in ensuring that children's communication styles or preferred research methods are valued rather than corrected or reshaped to fit institutional expectations.

## 6.3 Monitoring, evaluation and learning: Demonstrating value

Across both discussions, MEL was about centering children and youth and simultaneously building a picture of contribution, influence and institutional learning over time rather than producing definitive proof of 'value' or 'impact'. Participants consistently noted that systems change is incremental and relational, and that documenting gradual shifts in behaviour, language, openness and follow-through can be as important as tracking formal policy amendments. The following focus areas and approaches for MEL were suggested:

**Talking to adults but centering children and youth:** As there is significant evaluation data on the benefits or value of participatory approaches for the children and youth involved, discussion explored children and the concept of childhood more widely as the focus for MEL activities:

| *"...Any evaluation of a participatory process has to put children and adolescents back at the center"*

In this sense, centring children and youth is about hearing from adults how children influenced them, their organisations or their practices. Notably, what influence do children and youth have on adult facilitators and decision makers they are collaborating with and on adult-centred institutions (which are often the organisations facilitating or funding participatory approaches).

**Tracking the influence of children and youth on decision-makers and institutional behaviour:** Participants spoke about looking for small but visible signals of change rather than only formal policy outcomes, for example, whether children's ideas were referenced in later meetings, whether officials asked follow-up questions, or whether institutions invited further dialogue. Several contributors described keeping meeting notes, reflection logs or informal debriefs after advocacy events to capture these shifts. As one participant put it:

| *"Sometimes the change is not the law changing - it's that next time they actually listen."*

**Looking at organisational and institutional learning, not only external change:** Both discussions highlighted that participatory work often changes the organisations themselves, for example, how staff communicate with children, how safeguarding is approached, or how consultation is built into planning. These internal shifts can be captured through reflective methods such as staff reflection sessions, after-action reviews or learning workshops. Participants described this as noticing:

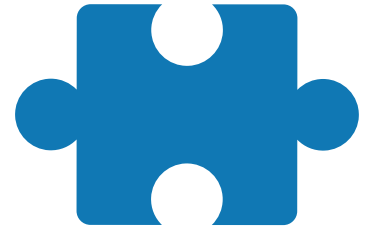
| *"How we work differently now, not just what the outside world did."*

**Retaining children's perspectives as an interpretive lens:** While the recognised evidence gap concerns systems and policy change, participants still stressed that children's reflections help interpret whether external shifts are meaningful. Children-friendly feedback tools, creative exercises, or small group reflection circles were mentioned as ways to understand whether children noticed or valued any change. As one participant phrased it,

| *"If something changed but they didn't feel it, we should ask what kind of change that was."*

**Feedback loops and visible follow-through:** Evaluation was also linked to accountability. Communicating back to children and youth about what happened after their involvement - even when little changed - was described as both an ethical responsibility and a source of learning evidence. Validation meetings, short summary briefs, or follow-up conversations were seen as practical tools for closing this loop and demonstrating that their contribution was valuable.





## 7. DESIGNING PARTICIPATORY WORK IN PRACTICE: WHAT DO WE NEED TO PLAN FOR?

As significant numbers of global toolkits and guidelines exist on how to implement participatory approaches with children and youth, the question is not which is the right tool to use or adapt, but what are the key factors that practitioners should consider when designing participatory programmes for children and youth on the topic of CSEA and related harms. The following factors were explored by participants in learning discussions and relate to both research and advocacy on CSEA.

**A shared responsibility - preparing adults:** One factor is that empowering children alone is not enough if the adult world is not prepared to listen. Several practitioners described situations where children were well prepared, articulate and confident, yet encountered indifference or dismissal from adult decision makers. As one participant put it,

| *"It cannot just be letting them talk and then we do what we were going to do anyway."*

Participatory approaches are often described as a two-sided process: strengthening children's confidence and skills while also working with adults to examine their own attitudes, biases and assumptions about children's rights and CSEA. However, the focus of this parallel work on addressing 'bias' has been with adult decision makers rather than the adults facilitating participatory projects. In addition, the focus has largely been on adults, even though children and youth are often influenced by the same harmful social norms, such as victim blaming, that shape adult attitudes toward CSEA.

**Recognising how participation supports protection:** One of the key reasons why participatory approaches are blocked for children and youth who have lived experiences of CSEA is concern that they will be re-traumatised or ‘triggered’ by their involvement in research or advocacy on the topic. This was described by some participants as ‘over protection’ who gave examples of formal institutions refusing to allow children to attend consultations or speak publicly, as one participant noted:

*“We say we want their perspective, but then we build systems that make it almost impossible for them to give it.”*

While participants did not dismiss the need for safeguarding and ethical considerations to underpin participatory approaches, they emphasised the importance of distinguishing between genuine need to protect children and youth and decisions driven mainly by discomfort or reputational risk.

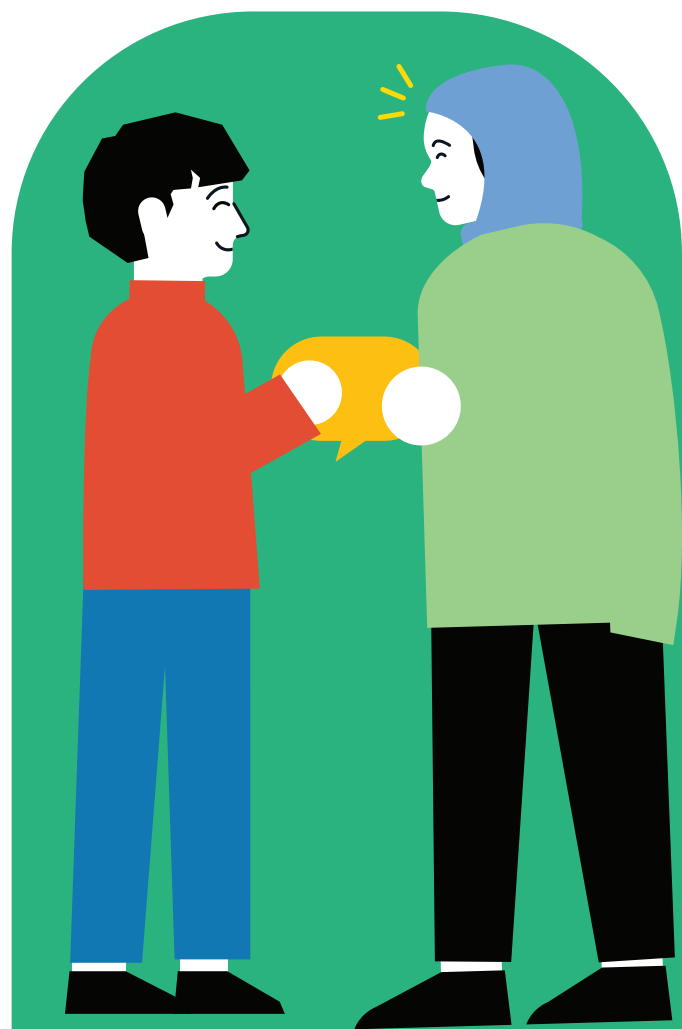
**Recognising children’s existing strategies:** Participants also highlighted how adult-centric and colonial norms shape what is recognised as “legitimate” participation. Formal meetings, institutional language and rigid agendas can unintentionally exclude many children whose strengths lie in other forms of expression. In contrast, many examples of effective children’s participation have emerged from informal or creative spaces such as community gatherings, art, music, street activism or peer-led dialogue rather than boardrooms or parliamentary settings - particularly in Latin America. One participant reflected,

*“Adults create profiles of how children should participate, without seeing that children already have their own leaders and struggles.”*

This led to the suggestion that preparation should not aim to make children “speak like adults,” but rather to strengthen children’s own languages, confidence and strategies, while helping adults learn to listen differently.

**Time, Trust and the Value of Long-Term Engagement:** Meaningful participation was consistently associated with long-term engagement rather than one-off events. When participation is embedded within ongoing programmes or youth groups, children and facilitators develop trust, shared understanding and clearer boundaries. In contrast, short-term or isolated consultations often require substantial effort simply to build rapport, explain purpose and establish emotional safety. Several participants noted that funders and organisations often underestimate the time required, treating participation as a single activity rather than a sustained process. As one practitioner explained,

*“You can’t build trust in a workshop and expect depth - it comes from continuity.”*



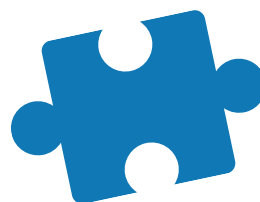
The same principle applies to group size: while large forums may increase visibility, working with smaller, well-supported groups of children and adults were repeatedly described as more conducive to honest dialogue, stronger ethical oversight and deeper learning.

**Targeting resources:** Resource realities were another recurring theme. Participatory approaches have never been framed as cost-saving approaches, so in the reality of the resource-limited environments practitioners operate in, the funding available needs to be carefully targeted. Skilled adult facilitators were seen as essential, particularly in managing disclosures, navigating group dynamics and ensuring that conversations remain supportive rather than interrogative. It was noted that some practical considerations such as transport, connectivity or interpretation can determine who is able to participate and whose voices remain absent. Without these supports, participation tends to favour children who are already advantaged or geographically accessible. Participants also discussed the “opportunity costs” for children and youth - the time, income or caring responsibilities children and youth may sacrifice in order to take part in activities - and the importance of compensation. One contributor summarised this challenge succinctly:

*“If we don’t recognise what they are giving up to be here, we are only hearing from the children who can afford to participate.”*

**The “missing middle” and representation vs depth:** Finally, the discussions acknowledged a key group that often falls between established participation structures. Youth with lived experience of sexual abuse or exploitation in childhood (sometimes called survivors) were described as occupying a “missing middle” - no longer fitting neatly into child-protection frameworks but not yet comfortable or safe within adult survivor spaces (particularly boys and young men). This gap leaves limited avenues for meaningful engagement despite their potential insight. Alongside this, participants reflected on the tension between representation and depth: efforts to involve very wide or diverse groups of children (and adults) can dilute the effectiveness of participatory approaches and the sustainability of change.

The overall message emerging from these exchanges was that participatory approaches should be intentional, relational and realistically resourced, including in how learning and impact are understood. Participants emphasised that monitoring and evaluation should focus on building a picture of contribution and influence over time rather than proving the impact or effectiveness of participatory approaches. This can be achieved by noticing small but visible shifts in how adults listen, how institutions respond, or how organisational practices evolve - rather than waiting for formal policy changes to occur. Planning participatory work means deciding what types of change really matter, such as improvements in how adults listen to children, how institutions respond to their views, or how everyday organisational practices gradually shift over time. In addition, it involves deciding who has the authority to judge whether these changes have taken place and how these changes are communicated back to the children involved.





## 8. IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING AND PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT

Translating this learning into funding proposals or concept notes for participatory research and advocacy projects on CSEA highlights the following:

**Clearly justify the purpose and scope of children's participation:** It is important to clearly articulate *why* children's participation is necessary and *where* it adds distinct value, rather than assuming participation is inherently positive. Proposals will be stronger when they explain which stages of a project will involve children directly and which tasks will remain with adults. Presenting children's engagement as **strategic** (i.e. part of a long-term advocacy programme) and **targeted** (i.e. focused on a specific topic of CSEA or a specific group of children), rather than "children involved in everything", was seen by participants as both more realistic and more effective.

**Budget for facilitation, safeguarding and wellbeing as core project components:** meaningful participation of children and youth requires dedicated resources for facilitation, safeguarding/wellbeing and intergenerational work. Budget lines should be incorporated as core components of project design rather than optional extras in the following areas:

- Provision of skilled and experienced facilitators (or training for facilitators to develop appropriate skills).
- Preparation of adults and children/youth for intergenerational dialogue by addressing adultism, bias and harmful social norms on CSEA.
- Provision of wellbeing support to children and youth and safeguarding response mechanisms, such as onward referral, for those who disclose abuse.

**Allow sufficient time for trust-building, contextual adaptation and feedback to children:** Proposals should also reflect the time needed to build trust, adapt methods to local cultural and language contexts, and establish feedback loops so that children are informed about what changes as a result of their involvement.

**Include compensation and logistical support to enable inclusive participation:**

Logistical considerations, in particular, compensation for the time and income children may lose by participating, may determine who is able to participate and whose voices are excluded. Integrate these costs explicitly into funding proposals as *measures that enable inclusion* rather than administrative overheads.

**Frame monitoring and evaluation around contribution and systems-level change:**

Proposals are strengthened when they outline how learning and impact will be documented beyond immediate child-level outcomes - including how the implementation of participatory approaches may influence institutional behaviour, policy discussions or organisational practice over time. Framing monitoring and evaluation as a process of tracing contribution and systems-level learning (rather than promising linear proof of impact) was viewed as more credible and more aligned with the realities of advocacy and social change.





## 9. CONCLUSION

This report set out to explore what is meant by the “value” of participatory work in research and advocacy on CSEA, particularly beyond its recognised benefits for the children and youth directly involved. A central question underpinning the learning discussions was what difference it makes when children and young people participate directly in these processes, compared to when research and advocacy are led solely by adults. While this question cannot be addressed through experimental comparison, the reflections shared by participants point to several distinctive contributions that participatory approaches may offer in practice.

Across both discussions, participatory work was described as adding value to the quality and credibility of research and advocacy by strengthening trust between researchers and participants, shaping more relevant research questions, influencing how findings are interpreted, and grounding advocacy messages in lived experience and collective perspectives. These contributions can improve the contextual relevance and legitimacy of evidence used to inform advocacy, which in turn may influence how recommendations are received by decision makers. For practitioners, these insights provide a basis for articulating to funding partners that participatory approaches are not solely rights-based commitments, but methodological choices that can strengthen the accuracy, applicability and strategic positioning of research and advocacy outputs.

Participatory approaches were also understood as creating value at the level of organisational learning and professional practice. Involving children and youth in research and advocacy processes can influence how organisations design programmes, interpret safeguarding responsibilities, communicate with children, and integrate consultation into planning and decision-making processes. In this sense, the contribution of participatory work is not limited to external influence but includes changes in internal practice and institutional responsiveness over time. Practitioners may therefore wish to frame investment in participatory approaches as supporting institutional learning that enhances programme relevance and reduces the risk of interventions being based on adult assumptions about children’s experiences or priorities.

Importantly, participants emphasised that these dimensions of value are closely interconnected with the value experienced by the children and youth involved. Improvements in research relevance, advocacy credibility or organisational learning often emerge through relational processes that support children's confidence, solidarity and collective engagement. Rather than being treated as separate outcomes, these forms of value may be understood as mutually reinforcing.

Taken together, the discussions suggest that the contribution of participatory work on CSEA is more likely to be observed in gradual shifts in relationships, attitudes and practices than in linear cause-and-effect outcomes. This framing may assist practitioners in communicating with donors about the types of change participatory approaches are designed to support, including strengthened trust in research processes, more grounded advocacy messages, and adaptive organisational practices. Presenting participation as an investment in the credibility, legitimacy and long-term effectiveness of research and advocacy, rather than as a stand-alone activity, may support more realistic expectations of impact and more sustained funding for participatory work over time.



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