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Children's participation in local governance in Greece:
Child and youth council members' views and experiences

La participación de niñas y niños en la política local en Grecia: perspectivas y experiencias de quienes integran los consejos infantiles y juveniles

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Resumen:

La participación en la vida cívica constituye un derecho fundamental de la infancia. Este estudio cualitativo, basado en 10 grupos focales, examinó las opiniones y experiencias de niñas, niños, adolescentes y jóvenes en Grecia sobre el derecho de la infancia a participar en la política local. Los resultados muestran que, a pesar del valor otorgado al derecho de participación de la infancia en los procesos de toma de decisiones a nivel local, se pudieron identificar una serie de obstáculos, principalmente barreras institucionales y culturales, así como situaciones de discriminación y exclusión social hacia ciertos grupos de niños y niñas que impiden la plena materialización de este derecho. El artículo plantea distintas formas de promover, fortalecer e implementar una participación infantil significativa.

Palabras clave: Participación infantil, gobernanza local, Consejos Municipales de Juventud, derechos de la infancia, estudio con grupos focales.

Abstract:

Child participation in civic life constitutes a fundamental children's right. This qualitative study, conducting 10 focus groups, examined the views and experiences of children, adolescents and young people in Greece about the right of the child to participate in local governance. The findings show that despite the value placed on children's right to participate in local decision-making processes, a series of obstacles, most saliently institutional and cultural barriers as well as issues of discrimination and social exclusion of specific child groups, were identified obstructing full realization of this right. Ways to promote, strengthen and implement meaningful child participation are discussed.

Keywords: Child participation, local governance, Municipal Youth Councils, children's rights focus group study.

Introduction

The right to be heard and taken seriously is fundamental to human dignity and the healthy development of every child and young person. In this context, child participation in civic life has been widely identified as one of the most important dimensions of children's rights. As such, it can be defined as the engagement of children – individually or collectively – with opportunities to form and express their views and to influence matters that concern them directly and indirectly (Lansdown, 2018).

In the last few years, particular emphasis has been placed on fostering child participation in local governance, as its benefits are considered diverse and valuable, for both the children and their communities (UNICEF, 2017). In terms of governance, child participation can lead to better and more direct decision-making processes, and can contribute to the development of more robust and efficient services (Mitra, 2005). As regards children, community participation has been shown to be associated with positive development, empowerment, capacity-building, and peer networking (Zeldin et al., 2007), development of ties to the community (Matthews, 2001), experiential learning about formal institutions (Zeldin et al., 2007), and support for citizenship (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

Recently, the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) stressed the need for further action at local government level to better promote children's rights. However, there is widespread concern that local governments lack the necessary knowledge, resources, capacities and monitoring skills to introduce children's meaningful participation at a local level (UNICEF, 2022). Whereas efforts in this direction are undertaken, participation tends to be short-term, fragmentary and concerns only a small minority of children and youth.

As child and youth participation has gained prominence in policy and practice rhetoric, its translation into reality has led to dilemmas and challenges in practice. These include concerns about tokenism, the lack of impact on decision-making, adults' indifference or even resistance to promote meaningful child participation, sustainability problems and questions about children and young people's "representativeness" (Tisdall, 2023). In their research on children's experiences of participation in Ireland, Horgan et al. (2015) revealed children's disappointment and dissatisfaction with the level of their input in

decision making in their local communities, as a result of barriers such as adults' negative attitudes towards young people in the community, and the lack of appropriate and genuinely participatory frameworks and processes. Similarly, Molloy et al. (2002) found that structural, behavioral and logistical issues act as a brake on cooperation between children, young people and adults in the context of governance in local government.

In 2021, the European Commission carried out a study (Janta et al., 2021) on child participation at the international, national and local levels. This study covered 28 Member States (27 EU Member States and the UK). The collected evidence suggested that societal views and attitudes towards children, their competencies and abilities to participate, complex bureaucracies, the absence of feedback to children on the results of child participation, as well as shortcomings in the availability and accessibility of information on participation mechanisms, are some of the key barriers to impactful and inclusive child participation. Another important challenge is the limited representativeness and inclusiveness of vulnerable or disadvantaged children.

Addressing the problem and promoting children's meaningful participation in local governance involve a wide array of mechanisms, which have proven to be highly useful and effective. These may include, among others: the engagement of children and youth representatives in local government decision-making bodies (Alanko, 2019; Checkoway et al., 2005; Horgan et al., 2015); consultation with children and young people's representatives and Municipal Children and Youth Councils on issues related to child and youth policies in the local community (Checkoway et al., 2005); and, feedback from local government officials to monitor the implementation of relevant decisions and policies (Shier et al., 2012).

In Greece, the relevant policies and measures that have been adopted to promote children's participation in local governance are limited in number. These include the institution of Municipal Youth Councils and UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), which is being implemented in 47 countries throughout the world, including Greece.

Particularly, in 2006, Law 3443 introduced the institution of the Municipal Youth Councils, that consist of children and young people aged 15 to 28 (Article 2). Their establishment and operation are the responsibility of each Municipality. Councils are intended to identify, highlight and monitor youth needs and challenges at a local level, as well as to take initiatives and measures ensuring young people's active and effective participation in the local community in cooperation with the relevant Local Government Agencies. However, 18 years later, in 2023, only 11 Municipal Youth Councils have been created and are operating out of a total of 332 Municipalities throughout the country. It should be noted that children under 15 years of age are still deprived of similar opportunities, while their participation is limited to occasional events and actions which are carried out either by the Municipalities or the Municipal Youth Councils, and are symbolic rather than substantive in nature. A similar slow progression rate is recorded in the participation of the Municipalities in UNICEF's

CFCI Program due to their failure to demonstrate responsiveness; in 2023, only 11 out of the total 332 Municipalities participated in this program.

Furthermore, it should be noted that in Greece the issue of the promotion of child participation in local governance has not been subject to academic research. To our knowledge, no studies have been carried out either to identify the Municipal Youth Councils' operation or to specifically investigate the involvement of younger children in local governance. The only reference to children's views regarding opportunities for participation in local affairs in Greece is a poll titled "What can local authorities do to make your city more friendly to children and youth?" (U-Report Greece UNICEF, 2022), with a total of 545 respondents (53% were aged 15-19, and 19% were under 15 years of age). According to the results, respondents expressed their willingness to be involved in decision-making processes at a local level, more than half (55%) said they wished to be involved through specialized online applications, while participation through Municipal Youth Councils ranked second in order of preference.

In the light of the above, the present qualitative study was carried out to examine the views and experiences of children and members of the Municipal Youth Councils on the right of child participation in local governance, in Greece.

Methodology

Aim and objectives

The main aim of the present qualitative study was to explore the views, experiences and recommendations of adult and minor members of Municipal Youth Councils, adolescents vulnerable to social exclusion, primary and secondary school students, and representatives of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) Municipalities, about the right of child participation in local governance. More specifically, the objectives of the study were to explore (a) children's right to be heard and have their views considered and taken seriously, (b) child participation in local decision-making about matters that concern and affect them, (c) factors that may facilitate or obstruct child participation in local decision-making, and (d) suggestions about developing a framework within which processes and structures would enable promotion of the right of child participation in local governance.

Study populations – participants

Study populations of interest were adult and minor members of Municipal Youth Councils, minor individuals vulnerable to discrimination, social exclusion and poverty, secondary school children, primary school children and representatives of Child-Friendly Cities Initiative Municipalities in Greece. The study's focus groups included a

total of 76 participants. In particular, there were 8 adult members of Municipal Youth Councils, 5 minor members of Municipal Youth Councils, 16 adolescents representing vulnerable groups (13-16 years old), 18 secondary school students (13-15 years old), 17 primary school children (10-12 years old) and 12 representatives of CFCI Municipalities. Assisted by the project partners with advertising the study, a purposive sampling technique was adopted to select participants belonging to our study populations and who had expressed an interest in taking part in the study.

Data collection method: Focus group

Data collection was carried out through focus groups. Focus groups constitute a qualitative research method whereby the emphasis is placed on the group, the interaction among its members and the dynamics that are developed during the group interview. In focus group discussions, open-ended questions are asked by the facilitator. Participants express their views and experiences, but at the same time they listen to those of other participants. Whilst listening to other people's views and experiences, participants have the chance to think about these, and in the light of these other perspectives, they further examine and reflect on their own. People can pose questions to each other, ask for clarifications, comment on the views/experiences they have heard and encourage others to express additional thoughts, points and understandings around issues of common interest (Bryman, 2016).

In total, 10 focus groups were held. More specifically: One focus group with adult members of Municipal Youth Councils; One focus group with minor members of Municipal Youth Councils; Three focus groups with adolescents (aged 13-16) from vulnerable backgrounds who are supported from a child welfare organization; Two focus groups with secondary school adolescents (aged 13-15); Two focus groups with primary school children (aged 10-12); and one focus group with representatives of Child-Friendly Cities Initiative Municipalities.

The focus groups that were conducted with primary school children (10-12 years old) were designed to be child-centered. Creative methods and approaches, suitable for their age, (i.e., play, drawing, visual and verbal tools) were employed to create a secure and potentially empowering environment.

Research procedure

The partners on the broader project approached potential volunteers and informed them about the study, or the parent/carer in the case of minor individuals. Next, the project partners scheduled the focus groups which were conducted by the researchers. The focus groups were carried out from May to October 2023.

These focus groups were based on interview guides comprising questions on: (a) perceptions about the right of child participation in local decision-making processes; (b) local community issues relating to children; (c) the benefits of children's participation in local governance; (d) challenges and barriers to children's participation in local decision-making; and (e) ways and processes to promote the right of children to participate in local governance.

Questions were adapted as necessary to the composition of the focus groups, while creative methods and child-centered activities were incorporated in the design of the interview guide related to the primary school student focus groups. Oral data were recorded to enable their verbatim transcription, in line with best practice for their subsequent analysis.

Ethical considerations

All participants were informed about the study purpose, their voluntary participation, the focus group procedure and the necessity of recording the interview, the protection of their anonymity, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In particular, all participants were informed via a "Participant Information Sheet", and signed an "Informed Consent Form" for their participation in the focus group. In the case of minor individuals, their parents/carers were first asked to give their permission and written consent. Following that, minor participants provided written assent to participate in the study.

The research was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of add West Attica. So it will be University of West Attica (Ref. No.: 45694 – 10/05/2023).

Analysis

The analysis and processing of the collected data was performed employing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Specifically, data analysis included the following stages: (a) Verbatim transcription of the audio-recorded interviews. (b) Repeated reading of the transcripts and detailed examination of the data so that the researchers familiarize themselves with the data and develop an overall and complete picture of what was said by participants. (c) Then, data were coded, and (d) semantically related codes were grouped together into broader thematic categories related to the research objectives. (e) Finally, thematic categories were revised, refined and systematized with a view to producing the final results and drawing the study conclusions. During the analysis, attention was paid to similarities and potential differences between the different participant categories: (a) members of Municipal Youth Councils, (b) primary and secondary school children, (c) children from vulnerable

backgrounds and (d) representatives of Child-Friendly Cities Initiative Municipalities. Similar and different views and perspectives are highlighted in the analysis below where appropriate. To ensure rigour of the research process and trustworthiness of the findings, emerging categories and themes were constantly discussed, refined and revised among the research team as well as reflections and acknowledgment of researchers' own interpretations and understandings.

Findings

Five main themes were derived from the qualitative data analysis following the focus group interviews: 1) views on children's right to participation; 2) experiences of children's participation in decision-making at local level; 3) challenges and barriers to children's participation in local governance; 4) discrimination in children's participation in local governance; and 5) suggestions for enabling children's participation in the community and local decision-making. These themes are presented below with indicative relevant quotes from the participants' accounts in the group interviews whilst similarities and differences across focus groups are discussed where appropriate.

Theme 1: Opinions on the importance of children's participation

When asked what they knew about their rights, the children mentioned various rights, including the right to express their opinion on matters that concern them and to be taken seriously.

"To share their opinion freely, to be looked after, not to be mistreated, not to work." (Children's focus group of the Child Welfare Organization)

"That we should speak our mind and speak it freely without fear of how others will react, and that we should be taken seriously." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Paggaio Municipality)

Most children participating in the research felt that they know their rights. Yet, a few highlighted that *"many children do not know their rights… it's a topic that remains in the shadows"* (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Larissa Municipality).

One of the key points of discussion across all research participants was whether and why children's and young people's participation in decision-making at local level related to them is important. All research participants strongly agreed about the importance and the benefits of their participation for mainly two reasons: first, that children and young people know best about their current needs and, second, that it is about their future.

"Because I want to decide where I will live, in what environment I will live." (Children's focus group of Primary School of Volvi Municipality)

"Since we are the new generation, we must participate in the decisions because we will change tomorrow's world, our place and our country for the better." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Larissa Municipality)

"We [adults] are essentially creating a society now, however it is our children and future generations who will be living with the results, who will experience them. So, it is very important that they also have a voice in this." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

Participants acknowledged in the focus group interviews that children, by participating in local decision-making, will be able to bring a new perspective to local issues and that their experiences and suggestions can lead to innovative solutions that are better aligned with the specific needs and challenges of the community. However, the members of Municipal Youth Councils also expressed further reasons for children's participation in local governance, as they perceived this as both a beneficial experience for children enabling them to understand democracy, civic values and social responsibility, and a learning and empowerment process designed to transform children and young people and help them develop and grow into responsible and accountable citizens.

"When the student, from a very early age is engaged in the process of shaping a proposal himself, an opinion which he will implement, in essence he will 'own' this and he will automatically protect it in the future as well." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

Theme 2: Experiences of children's participation in local decision-making

When children were asked in focus group interviews to identify some local issues that concern them in their everyday lives in their community, they mentioned several things: road and neighborhood safety; protection of the environment; local infrastructures (school buildings, leisure facilities, playgrounds, parks, etc.), as well as issues of equality, diversity and access.

"Of course we have an opinion! For example, about schools and other buildings, where we are playing or exercising, these should be properly maintained." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Paggaio Municipality)

"We would like to feel safe, especially late at night and there is not enough lighting. As girls, especially, we are always afraid, and we must be accompanied or hold our keys in between our fingers in case something happens." (Children's focus group of the Child Welfare Organization)

Education was one of the main issues that children reported being concerned about, as it shapes their knowledge and skills and their expectations for the future. The environment was another important topic on which children reported their willingness to give their views, as they will be the ones to live with the consequences of environmental change. Children's awareness of the environment and their role in preserving it was evident. In addition, they seemed to be particularly concerned about issues of social inequalities due to poverty, racism, and disability, expressing their desire to contribute to the creation of a more just and inclusive society. Also, leisure, entertainment, and sports are issues that children reported being concerned about in their daily lives, in relation to the availability of relevant and appropriate spaces for children's activities and the accessibility to these activities. Finally, safety and security in their lives in the community appeared to be of particular concern to children, with the dangerousness of places and road safety being significant.

The members of the Municipal Youth Councils and the representatives of the CFCI Municipalities subscribed with the view that anything about everyday life in the community could be an issue that matters to children, identifying similar local issues as the children above:

"Any issue that is about making child-friendly cities – for example accessible parks and green spaces, bike lanes and alternative means of transport, appropriate infrastructures." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

Based on participants' accounts, there is no limitation to the local and community issues that may concern and relate to children, and on which they could have a say, nor is there any restriction to participate in the relevant decision-making processes. Instead, their participation in these was considered crucial in making cities and communities more accessible, diversity friendly and respectful.

In relation to local and community issues that concern them, the majority of children in the focus group interviews said that they feel they are not listened to and that they have no participation in decision-making.

"We have never been asked" and *"I have never been given the opportunity to express my opinion for important issues that are about me."* (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Paggaio Municipality)

"Our voice as children is not heard by anyone." (Children's focus group of Primary School of Volvi Municipality)

Similarly, members of the Municipal Youth Councils agreed that there are hardly any experiences of children's participation in decision-making in their communities.

"Regarding local issues, I would say that the answer about children's participation is an absolute no." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

In the focus group interviews, children, members of Municipal Youth Councils, and representatives of the CFCI Municipalities mentioned some actions carried out by Municipal Youth Councils in schools in order to raise awareness and introduce children to local governance issues. Whilst these actions were considered to encourage children's participation in engaging both in dialogue and action, yet as it was explained, these were neither found to be regular nor led to further participation in local governance.

In general, the school community was identified by all research participants as an appropriate and effective space of shaping and implementing democratic processes and participation at an early age.

"In our class assembly, each of us can share our views freely." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Paggaio Municipality)

"In other words, in their community and especially their microcosm, we can say that [student] councils and all the institutional frameworks give the right and the means for children to participate in the context of the school." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

In sum, it appeared that despite the existence of Municipal Youth Councils and the existence of local issues of serious concern to children in their daily lives in the community, children do not have experience of systematic participation in local governance and participation in local decision-making processes.

Theme 3: Challenges and barriers to children's participation in local governance

The participants of focus group interviews discussed the root causes for children's non-participation in local decision-making, focusing mainly on institutional and cultural factors.

Interview participants referred to legal and policy frameworks, and related deficiencies, which do not adequately support children's participation in local governance. In particular, the current institutional framework that sets age limits for participation in decision-making processes, is systematically excluding children; also, bureaucratic barriers and lack of child-friendly policies can hinder progress in this direction.

Regarding the institutional factors, members of Municipal Youth Councils noted that Municipal Youth Councils have a minimum age limit of 16 years old for participation and therefore children of younger age are excluded from these: *"we have a minimum age limit of 16, something that might be a mistake from our side…"* (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils).

Discussing the institutional barriers to the development of systematic actions for children's right to participate in local decision-making, the representatives of CFCI Municipalities also mentioned the absence of relevant policies and formal procedures by the Municipalities, as well as the lack of human resources and the problem of understaffing of their services.

"To be honest, we have not made a second attempt or lots of other things, because we are too few people here. So, it's a bit of a problem all this, too few as staff to be able to deal with all this." (Focus group with representatives of CFCI Municipalities)

Furthermore, the lack of relevant awareness, knowledge, and appropriate skills among children to enable them to participate effectively in local decision-making processes was mentioned by participants as one of the main barriers to children's participation in local governance.

"We may know that we have a voice, but we haven't learnt how to use it." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Larissa Municipality)

"We may know some of the community problems, but we are not informed about the ways we can contribute to their resolution." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Paggaio Municipality)

It was pointed out by participants that the mere token participation of children lacking meaningful impact in relevant processes had a negative impact on their experiences. It disappointed and discouraged them from participating in local governance activities. Participants advocated for genuine and meaningful participation where their voices and opinions are heard, respected, and implemented.

"Even if I share my views, I know that the teacher will not pay attention and he will ignore me as soon as he leaves the room. At home, accordingly, if I say something, my parents won't do anything about it too. So, I don't even bother to express my views and wishes because I know nothing will happen" (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Larissa Municipality).

The overwhelming majority of research participants identified the dominant 'culture', in other words the societal beliefs and stereotypes related to childhood as the fundamental reason for children's exclusion from consultation and participation processes. Adults, according to focus group interview participants, generally tend to undervalue children's ability to understand complex issues; they also assume that children lack maturity, and give less value, importance and priority to children's views, and, as a result, decisions are imposed on them:

"Adults do not take us seriously... For example, once, I said to my teacher that I didn't like what she was asking me to do, and she responded 'You're a bunch of babies and you can't have an opinion'." (Children's focus group of Primary School of Thermi Municipality)

"Often it is said to me 'you are just a child; you don't know anything yet. I live longer, I have more knowledge and experience and therefore my opinion is valid', and this is how this undervaluation of children is created." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Larissa Municipality)

Similarly, members of the Municipal Youth Councils expressed their concerns about the power imbalance and authority of adults that limit children's participation

in actively shaping their lives in the community and making informed judgments.

"I would like to add the issues of power, roles, and authority. This mentality and culture start from within the family and this is also found at political level, and of course is adopted by the child. In general, someone older who has experience and authority, who has gotten the taste of 'holding' a seat, a position, hardly makes space for someone younger, especially children." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

In addition to the aforementioned barriers, participants finally acknowledged that there also is a lack of child-friendly spaces and communication processes to promote and establish children's participation in local governance equipped with age-appropriate equipment to facilitate learning and engagement.

"There is no appropriate space for children for such purposes. Even the Municipal Youth Council cannot really host children to enable participatory discussions and actions." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

Theme 4: Discrimination in children's participation in local governance

Participants in the focus group interviews discussed issues related to promoting inclusion and integration in community activities and encouraging participation in local governance for all children, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and disability. They mentioned that some children may have less power to speak, be heard or get organized.

"There is this issue of accessibility of vulnerable groups which are a minority in society. We have raised this issue of accessibility very recently in the council too." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

Both child and adult participants identified some specific groups of children in the community that, according to their views, experience discrimination and social exclusion in general, which may prevent them from participating in local governance initiatives. In particular, they mentioned children of diverse background and identity, such as children with disabilities, victims of violence, minority groups, Roma children, refugee and migrant minors, and children from families living on the edge of poverty.

"Children with disabilities don't have access." (Children's focus group of Primary School of Volvi Municipality)

"They may have come from another country which they may had to leave because of war or earthquake, something that happened and their house was destroyed or something else, and they came for example to our city and they can't pay for the activities." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Paggaio Municipality)

Regarding the types of discrimination experienced by vulnerable groups of chil-

dren, participants reported that children from racial and ethnic minorities often face discrimination based on their cultural background or language combined with unequal access to opportunities and services, while noted that children with disabilities often face barriers to participation due to physical and architectural obstacles, resulting in exclusion from community and pleasure activities.

"Access to people and children with disabilities is often very difficult, if not impossible. And in general mobility itself, the pavements on the streets, it is for them like a zigzag course with obstacles." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

Regarding the challenges related to the inclusion of vulnerable children in child participation initiatives at the community level, participants highlighted the barriers of physical accessibility, communication, stigma, and negative beliefs as the most significant. As a result, according to them, children of other ethnicities and children with disabilities feel unwanted or reluctant to participate in community activities, doubt their own abilities and worth, and avoid expressing their opinions and ideas as well as participating in decision-making processes.

Theme 5: Suggestions for enabling children's participation in the community and local decision-making

Participants across all focus groups discussed extensively ways that children's and young people's participation can be enabled in the local governance in their communities. They acknowledged that any meaningful change towards an authentic and effective participation of children in decision-making is dependent on a cultural change in adults' attitudes which involves respecting children's views and participatory rights on both formal and informal procedures.

"To treat them as 'adults', not only to listen to their views but also to include their decisions in adults' decisions. That is, not just 'I heard you' but also 'I took what you told me and did something about it'." (Focus group of minor members of Municipal Youth Councils)

Participants discussed the importance of education, information, and awareness on issues of children's rights and especially on their right to participation in local governance across children and young people, teachers, and school community as well as parents and wider community.

This cultural shift to processes of children's authentic and meaningful expression and participation in local decision-making involving the social actors – children, parents, schools, and communities – would need to be accompanied by several changes in the very infrastructures and methods of children's participation according to participants. The institutional establishment of the Municipal Youth Councils and their support with appropriate infrastructure, skills, and tools to enable them to engage properly, systematically, and effectively in actions with children and to promote the integration of their views in de-

cision-making processes was mentioned by the participants as being of key importance.

"There is a need for a child-friendly space. I don't think it is possible to have meetings with 10 and 11-year-old children in the premises of the City Hall, it is not suitable for that, they are very impersonal and very hostile towards a child. Also, some equipment, for example papers, markers, some means could make this whole thing a little more interesting for children." (Focus group of minor members of Municipal Youth Councils)

"We need to be inclusive, especially in municipalities that have a distance between them. There should be a dedicated day for children to participate from everywhere. That is, children should be transported to the meeting places and accordingly we should be transported to where the children are." (Focus group of adult members of Municipal Youth Councils)

Another important dimension that was suggested, was the need to promote respect for diversity, inclusion and equal integration, ensuring that actions and programs promoting children's participation in local governance are accessible and sensitive to the needs of all children, including those with disabilities and from marginalized backgrounds.

"Children with disabilities or from other countries need to participate too in the Councils, perhaps with some help with the language and access with the wheelchair." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Paggaio Municipality)

In the focus group interviews, participants were concerned about the way young children are able to get involved and participate in local governance processes and issues.

"We could establish a children's council with representatives from each neighborhood." (Children's focus group of Secondary School of Larissa Municipality).

The need for children to be supported in their participation in local governance by adults (teachers, members of Municipal Youth Councils) or older minor members of Municipal Youth Councils who act as their allies and supporters, as "mentors", mediating and supporting them in the process of consultation and participation in local community affairs, was also stressed.

"Children of young age could participate with the help of their teachers or other Council members" (Children's focus group of the Child Welfare Organization)

In addition, the discussion focused on active counselling, consultation, participation and communication processes between community authorities, organizations and children, in order to create a strong basis ensuring the meaningful participation of children and the fulfilment of their rights in the context of local governance. The following strategies were outlined: Creative and experiential special awareness, education and consultation methods for younger children; Use of digital media for children to share their ideas, to report any difficulties and be connected with like-minded peers and community leaders (e.g., social media, platforms for children, online fo-

rums for group di scussions, webpages for children); Research and referendums on specific issues related to local problems (online or at schools).

Discussion

This research identified a wide range of issues related to the implementation of the right of the child to participate in local governance in Greece, which are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of key findings

Theme 1: Opinions on the importance of children's participation	Acknowledgement of the importance that children participate in local decision-making
Theme 2: Experiences of children's participation in local decision-making	Children's participation in all local and community issues was considered crucial in making cities and communities more accessible, diversity friendly and inclusive
	Despite the existence of Municipal Youth Councils, children do not have systematic participation in local governance and local decision-making
Theme 3: Challenges and barriers to children's participation in local governance	Legal and bureaucratic limitations and restrictions
	Lack of relevant awareness, knowledge, and appropriate skills among children to enable them to participate in local decision-making processes
	Societal beliefs and stereotypes related to childhood (adultism)
	Lack of child-friendly spaces and communication processes with age-appropriate equipment
Theme 4: Discrimination in children's participation in local governance	Children of diverse background and identity may experience discrimination and social exclusion
	Discrimination may take the form of unequal access to opportunities and services or even physical and architectural obstacles, resulting in exclusion from community and pleasure activities
Theme 5: Suggestions for enabling children's participation in the community and local decision-making	Need for cultural shift of respecting children's views and participatory rights on both formal and informal procedures
	Raising awareness on issues of children's rights and participation in local governance across children and young people, teachers, and school as well as parents and wider community
	Establishing institutionally the Municipal Youth Councils with appropriate infrastructure, skills, and tools to engage properly, systematically, and effectively with children
	Programs need to be accessible and sensitive to the needs of all children, including those with disabilities and from marginalized backgrounds
	Use of older minor members of Municipal Youth Councils who act as "mentors"
	Creative and experiential special awareness, education and consultation methods for younger children, such as digital media, research and referendums on specific issues related to local problems (online or at schools)

One important finding is that children's participation in local decision-making is still far from being an established procedure within the Greek society. It faces a multitude of challenges and barriers that are mainly associated with cultural and institutional factors, as well as with the lack of relevant sources of support.

There was a strong consensus among minor and adult participants that child participation in local governance is a fundamental right and that there is a need to create a framework enabling the meaningful participation of children in local governance, thus promoting their empowerment as citizens. Participants highlighted the positive outcomes of youth involvement in community issues and relevant decisions which they expect to achieve for both themselves and their communities, and which are directly relevant to those recorded by international research (Matthews, 2001; Zeldin et al., 2007; Mitra, 2005; Flanagan & Levine, 2010) showing that child participation in local governance is related to the empowerment of citizenship, the development of ties to the community, peer networking, and the development of the community itself.

The prevailing perceptions of childhood were one of the key barriers to child participation in local governance. In particular, respondents mentioned that adults place less value, importance and priority on children's views, assuming that they lack the maturity and ability to comprehend complex issues. The problem of adultism and its corresponding culture are identified as major challenges to children's participation in local decision-making by several other studies carried out in various countries. In this regard, McGinley and Grieve (2010) point out that adults are skeptical about the maturity and skills of children and young people, while Ansell (2004) draws attention to the issue of power dynamics between adults and young people. Similar issues relating to adult-child power imbalance as barriers to children's participation have been identified by Horgan et al. (2015) and Alanko (2019). In particular, Bessell (2009) showed that adults' perceptions of children's abilities are reflected in areas such as institutional context and procedural requirements, cultural and social norms, lack of clarity about the meaning of children's participation, and concerns about potential negative consequences.

Another equally important challenge for the promotion of children's meaningful participation in local governance was identified by the participants who raised the question of whether, and to what extent, children's views are likely to be heard by local authority officials and influence their decisions. Furthermore, respondents mentioned that the lack of substantial involvement of children and young people in decision-making has a negative impact, causing them frustration and disengagement. This issue has been documented in literature and relevant research indicating that children and young people consider it imperative to be heard by local decision-makers, that they need to be seen and treated as equal participants, and that, in this regard, appropriate mechanisms should be established to provide formal participatory processes (Horgan, 2017; Tisdall, 2008; Wall & Dar, 2011).

The need to raise awareness on relevant issues and prepare adequately all parties involved in the promotion of children's right to local governance participation - children, parents, young people, and local government officials – through education and training, was suggested by research participants as a measure necessary to promote children's right to meaningful involvement in local decision-making. This issue is widely supported by different studies and international organizations' guidelines. In particular, it is argued that child education should provide children, among others, with sufficient knowledge on the processes and local issues they may have to deal with (Council of Europe, 2011; Howe, 2010; MacKinnon et al., 2007; Sheedy, 2008), and be aimed at enhancing children's critical thinking, training in public presentations and participation in formal meetings, at managing group dynamics, designing programs, and obtaining problem-solving skills, as well as raising awareness on discrimination issues (Checkoway, 2013), based on dynamic, fun, creative and participatory methods (Alanko, 2019; Shier et al., 2012). Furthermore, training for adults, in particular teachers and child protection and welfare professionals, as well as local government officials and staff, is highly suggested, with a focus on children's participation rights, the barriers to their implementation and ways to address them. In addition, research participants also stressed the need for children to be supported by adult mediators in order to enjoy their rights in general, and their right to local governance participation in particular. This kind of support is considered essential and crucial for the effectiveness of the effort, and it is argued that this is where alliance between adult mentors and children is of great importance (Shier et al., 2012). So are, for that matter, the proper training of mentors in necessary skills and their fulfilment of the criteria set by child protection standards (Lansdown, 2011).

Moreover, in the context of this study, both children and adult participants also identified discrimination and social exclusion of children due to disability, ethnicity and socio-economic status, as issues of concern to the Greek society at large. Even though international conventions state that all children should have equal opportunities to participate, in accordance with the principle of non-discrimination, numerous studies indicate that children from minority or marginalized groups continue to face challenges of exclusion from equal social life (Council of Europe, 2011). One example is that children with disabilities remain socially invisible and excluded from participation processes in local decision-making, although research demonstrates their ability to participate in decisions on issues that affect them, provided they are offered the right support (Cavet & Sloper, 2004). In spite of these challenges, there is much potential for increasing the participation of children with disabilities in local governance, including relevant and appropriate education of children with disabilities, flexible and inclusive participation processes, and raising community awareness about the rights of children with disabilities (Council of Europe, 2011).

Finally, the children and youth council members who participated in the research suggested an array of ways, methods and mechanisms that, based on their experience and views, can help foster children's participation in local governance. These sug-

gestions are consistent and align with the measures recommended by international organizations (Save the Children, 2020), thus highlighting young people's wealth of knowledge and ingenuity of ideas.

Conclusions

Research results have shown that children in Greece lack opportunities for meaningful participation in local governance, while their inclusion in local decision-making is not promoted. In this respect, various barriers were identified, including the absence of an institutional framework for the participation of children under 15 years of age in local governance, the non-recognition of the right to participate in local governance, the absence of relevant information and education programs, issues of child discrimination and social exclusion on the basis of disability, ethnicity and socio-economic status, as well as the dominant stereotypical culture undervaluing children's views and imposing adults' decisions based on power relations.

It seems there is a lot to be done in Greece to enhance children's meaningful participation in local governance. There is a clear need to design and implement appropriate and effective initiatives aimed at safeguarding children's rights, abilities, know-how and creativity, and at addressing challenges and discriminations. More specifically, the necessary actions include undertaking targeted measures to develop local political and institutional interventions, empowering and training children on their right to participate in local governance, creating a relevant supportive social environment, networking of agencies and bodies, adopting local processes that ensure child participation in local governance, also through the use of new technologies, and identifying ways to combat discrimination and promote inclusion.

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