



Nordic Welfare
Centre

Participation is protection – embedding children's rights in Nordic crisis governance

Nordic co-operation on children's
and young people's opportunities
for participation and development
after the Covid-19 pandemic



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Foreword

This report is a key part of the project Nordic co-operation on children's and young people's opportunities for participation and development after the Covid-19 pandemic, led by the Nordic Welfare Centre on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Committee for Children and Young People (NORDBUK).

The project aims to strengthen Nordic co-operation to make the region the most sustainable and integrated in the world, with a particular focus on equal opportunities, democratic participation, and the rights of children and young people. Central to this ambition is a commitment to a child rights-based approach, grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This report highlights how the Nordic countries upheld children's right to be heard, as set out in Article 12 of the Convention, during and after the pandemic. It also acknowledges areas of improvement, and most importantly, what must be done to safeguard every child's right to be heard, as well as their rights to life, development, and participation. Strengthening these rights is crucial for safeguarding our democracies and fostering inclusive, resilient societies.

Drawing on insights from the Nordic Ombudspersons for Children and a legal and child rights analysis by Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg, the report offers a unique perspective on how child participation has been realised and where further progress is needed.

The goal of Nordic co-operation is to create a society that amplifies children's voices, listens to them, and involves them in decisions affecting their lives. We envisage a Nordic region in which children and young people are inspired and empowered to participate in their communities, schools, and leisure activities, and in which adults in positions of authority recognise that social responsibility, empathy, and democratic values are fostered by listening to and involving children in accordance with their age and maturity.

We hope this report will inspire decision-makers, professionals, and other stakeholders to promote children's right to participate, embedding child rights more systematically in Nordic co-operation in both everyday governance and times of crisis.

Eva Franzén, Director

Merethe Løberg, Senior Advisor



Introduction

This report has been developed by the Nordic Welfare Centre in collaboration with Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg and the Nordic Ombudspersons for Children. Sandberg's contribution provides a robust academic foundation, offering insights into how the Nordic countries – both individually and collectively – can strengthen children's right to participation.

Understanding Article 12: What does it mean in practice?

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is one of the most fundamental provisions in the Convention. It affirms that all children who can form their own views have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

But what does this mean in practice? To comply with Article 12, states must do more than simply listen to children. They must create **structures, policies, and cultures** that enable children to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives. This includes:

- **Child-friendly procedures** in courts, schools, and public services
- **Participatory governance** in schools and local communities
- **National strategies** that embed children's voices in policymaking
- **Accessible information** so children can make informed choices
- **Respect for diversity**, ensuring that all children – including those with disabilities or in vulnerable situations – are heard

Governments, educators, caregivers, and civil society all share responsibility for making this right a reality. International organisations and local communities also play a key role in holding states accountable and fostering environments where children feel safe and empowered to speak up.

Importantly, the scope of Article 12 is broad. It applies not only to issues explicitly mentioned in the Convention, but to **all matters affecting children**, including those where their input can improve the quality of decisions.

Finally, Article 12 is closely linked to other human rights instruments, such as the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**. For children with disabilities, the right to be heard is especially critical, as they often face additional barriers to participation. Together, Articles 3 and 12 of the UNCRC reinforce the principle that children's views are not just symbolic, but essential to determining what is in their best interests.

The report is one of the final outputs of the project on Nordic cooperation on children's and young people's opportunities for participation and development after the pandemic, coordinated by the Nordic Welfare Centre on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers and NORDBUK. It seeks to improve understanding of how the right of children to be heard, as set out in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), has been upheld and implemented across the Nordic countries, particularly in crisis decision-making processes since the pandemic. Drawing on insights and evidence gathered during the project, as well as national policies and practices from 2021 to 2025, the report establishes a strategic foundation for enhancing the realisation of children's right to participation and upholding their rights more broadly.

Children and young people as contributors to the final recommendations

In addition to the contributions from the Nordic Ombudspersons for Children and the legal analysis by Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg, this report has also been shaped by the voices of children and young people themselves. Their active participation in the final conference in Helsinki and at a youth workshop where young participants provided reflections, priorities, and concrete proposals have directly influenced the final recommendations presented in this report. Their insights serve as a powerful reminder that children and young people are not only rights-holders, but also essential contributors to shaping policies that affect their lives – especially in times of crisis.

Background

The pandemic exposed critical shortcomings in the Nordic region's ability to uphold children's rights and especially their right to be heard and involved in decisions affecting them. Children and young people were largely excluded from decision-making processes, particularly in situations requiring swift government action. When their views were sought, it was often too late to influence decisions already made. Moreover, the adults or officials they engaged with frequently lacked the authority to advocate effectively on their behalf. This reflects a broader systemic issue: a lack of preparedness, coordination, and mechanisms to ensure meaningful child participation in emergencies.

In response to these challenges, the Nordic Welfare Centre recognised the need for independent, rights-based expertise to evaluate the situation and recommend improved policies and practices. The Nordic Ombudspersons for Children were invited to contribute national insights and professional evaluations. As independent institutions with deep knowledge of how children's rights are implemented in their respective countries, they are well positioned to identify systemic gaps and opportunities for improvement.

To complement this regional expertise with an international legal perspective, Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg – former Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child – was invited to conduct a Nordic-level analysis. Her contribution offers a comprehensive evaluation of how the Nordic countries implemented Article 12 during and after the pandemic and provides recommendations for embedding children's right to be heard in everyday governance and emergency preparedness frameworks.

The findings underscore the urgent need for more systematic and binding Nordic co-operation on children's rights. Such collaboration must be rooted in shared principles, supported by long-term structures for participation, and driven by the exchange of good – and when possible, best – practices that are rigorously evaluated. Only through coordinated and sustained efforts can the Nordic region ensure that children's voices are both heard and meaningfully influence the decisions that shape their lives at all times.

The Nordic Council of Ministers has emphasised the importance of integrating a child rights and youth perspective across all sectors of its work. This approach is essential to achieving its broader vision of making the Nordic region the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. This vision aligns closely with the United Nations Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focused on equality, inclusion, and participatory governance.

The Council's cross-sectoral strategy for children and young people, grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, aims to ensure that all children regardless of background can influence decisions that affect their lives, enjoy equal access to welfare, and grow up in a socially sustainable environment.

It is therefore imperative that the Nordic region adopts a coordinated, inclusive, and enduring approach, firmly anchored in these common frameworks. Only then can children's voices truly have a meaningful and lasting impact on the decisions that shape their present and future – whether in times of calm or in the face of crisis.



Article 12 as a cornerstone of children's rights

Author: Sigurveig Thorhallsdottir

1. **States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, with due weight given to those views in accordance with the child's age and maturity.**
2. **To this end, the child shall, in particular, be provided with the opportunity to be heard in any judicial or administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with procedural rules of national law.**

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Empowering children's voices: The significance of Article 12

Article 12 of the UNCRC provides all children capable of forming their own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them and puts the obligation on states to ensure that due weight is given to the views of children in accordance with their age and maturity. It is one of the general principles of the UNCRC and it must be considered when interpreting other provisions of the Convention. Article 12 marks a fundamental shift in how children are perceived, not merely as passive recipients of care and protection but as active participants in decisions that shape their lives. When effectively implemented, this right can

contribute to better decision-making, as it promotes children's empowerment and well-being and fosters their democratic participation. However, for this right to be fully realised, it requires more than just legal acknowledgement: it demands that children be given a real opportunity to express their views and have influence on matters that affect them.

Children's voices must be heard, respected, and acted upon

Understanding Article 12 involves recognising that children's voices must not only be heard but they also need to be respected and acted upon. This means providing accessible and inclusive platforms for children to express their opinions, ensuring they receive the necessary information to make informed choices, and integrating their views into decision-making processes at all levels. The degree of participation should be appropriate to their evolving capacities, acknowledging that children's ability to understand and contribute to discussions grows over time.

Children also have the right to refuse to express their views; it is a right, not an obligation. States must ensure that children receive all necessary information and guidance to make an informed decision about whether they want to express their views based on their best interests.

Stronger than democratic rights and freedom of expression

The right to be heard goes beyond traditional democratic rights and freedom of expression by mandating that children's opinions be taken seriously in decision-making processes. Unlike general democratic rights, which focus on adult participation, Article 12 emphasises listening to children and integrating their perspectives into policies that impact their lives. This fosters a more inclusive approach to child welfare and development.

Often referred to as 'participation'

Article 12 of the UNCRC is often referred to as 'participation' because it grants children the right to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. This participation means that children are not only heard, but their opinions are taken seriously and integrated into decision-making processes. This fosters a democratic culture where children learn to express themselves and influence the development of society.

Four general principles and the central role of Article 12

The UNCRC is built upon four general principles that should be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights:



Among these, Article 12 plays a pivotal role in enabling children's participation and ensuring their voices are heard. Without children's participation and the opportunity to express their opinions, the principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, and the right to life, survival, and development cannot be fully realised. Children's voices are crucial for understanding their needs and wishes, ensuring that decisions made are truly in their best interests.

Article 12 is both an individual right and a collective right. States must take measures to ensure that groups of children can express their views, even if assessing the age and maturity of each child within a group presents challenges.



Youth voices matter: A call to decision-makers

Author: Wilma Jensén, writer and Project Assistant at Nordjobb Sweden and The Norden Association Sweden

From the margins to the table: Nordic youth in crisis decision-making

Building on the national reflections and recommendations of the Nordic Children's Ombudspersons and Professor Sandberg on strengthening the implementation of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – particularly during times of crisis – this chapter provides insights from Nordic and Baltic youth. The chapter is based on a workshop organised by the Nordic Welfare Centre during the final conference on 'The right of children and young people to be heard, seen, and involved in the Nordic region' on 4–5 June 2025, held as part of a broader project on youth participation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This chapter summarises and reflects the voices and perspectives shared during the workshop. It is not a conclusion, but a beginning and a starting point for continued dialogue and shared responsibility, a reminder that Article 12 is not just a right on paper, but a principle that must be lived, especially at critical junctures.

The Covid-19 crisis revealed significant gaps in how children and young people were included in decision-making processes. While they had a right to be heard, many felt overlooked or excluded when it mattered most. This lack of inclusion during crisis both undermines trust and also leads to decisions that can fail to meet the needs of children and young people, and especially those in vulnerable situations.

During the workshop entitled 'How can we strengthen children's right to

participation in the Nordic region – and improve crisis management for the future?’, young people and adults from across the Nordic countries came together to explore how young people’s voices can be heard, especially during emergencies. Prior to the workshop, participants were introduced to the Ombudspersons’ recommendations and Professor Kirsten Sandberg’s Nordic analysis, which served as a shared foundation for the discussions.

Participants prioritised key actions from a list of recommendations and explored how young people can be recognised as valuable contributors to crisis planning. They also developed proposals for a Youth Crisis Response Team as a concrete model for meaningful youth participation in emergency contexts.

In summarising the young participants’ reflections, experiences, and proposals, this chapter offers vital input on how to realise Article 12 in practice and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

Importance of meaningful participation

A key consensus amongst participants was the necessity of ensuring genuine and meaningful child participation. This requires the establishment of permanent, inclusive structures for child participation at all levels of governance. Their involvement must extend across planning, implementation, and evaluation processes.

Participants emphasised the importance of clearly distinguishing for young people the difference between being merely consulted and having real influence. It is essential that children feel their contributions are taken seriously and that they can see the value and benefits of their involvement.

Encouraging youth to develop their own participation structures was also highlighted as a priority. To make this possible, decision-makers must provide the necessary support, resources, and space for youth-led initiatives to thrive.

Engaging civil society and legislative integration

Another key recommendation is the importance of engaging civil society organisations in crisis planning. Participants strongly advocated for the active involvement of civil society groups in developing, implementing, and monitoring child-focused crisis strategies. Participants emphasised the importance of working closely with civil society organisations, which in many cases act as early responders and trusted actors in times of crisis –particularly when it comes to reaching children and young people. Establishing strong, pre-existing relationships between civil society is therefore essential to ensuring responsiveness when crisis occurs.

In addition, participants highlighted the need to integrate children’s rights into crisis legislation. Embedding these rights within legal frameworks is crucial to

ensuring that children's rights are systematically considered and that participation is structurally secured and embedded in practice.

Youth as a resource in crisis planning and response

Participants discussed how children and youth can meaningfully contribute to crisis planning and response, and what measures ensure their voices are taken into account. They agreed that, under normal circumstances, established structures must foster respect and trust between youth and adults, laying the groundwork for effective collaboration during crises.

Recognising young people as a resource in non-crisis contexts strengthens their inclusion and influence when emergencies arise.

Accessible, age-appropriate information is essential, not only about current matters but also regarding children's right to be heard. When children know where to turn and whom to ask, their ability to influence decisions increases. Furthermore, education and competence development for children, youth, and adults alike enhance the likelihood that young people's contributions are taken seriously and acted upon.

Schools key platforms

Equally important is training adults who work with children and young people. Adults must be competent listeners and understand their role in empowering children to participate on their own terms. They should actively support young people's involvement and help shape a narrative that recognises the value of youth perspectives.

Schools were identified as key platforms for youth participation in that they serve as key spaces for children and youth participation. As familiar environments, schools provide accessible spaces where children and youth can engage meaningfully. Student councils serve as effective forums for decision-making and responsibility-taking, while schools more broadly can function as democratic arenas where participation skills are developed and practised at the local level. These structures support everyday engagement but can also play a vital role in involving children and youth in crisis-related planning and response.

Reaching silent youth and digital participation

Participants raised concerns that only certain segments of the youth population are actively involved, while many others remain unheard. Adults must recognise that a single young representative may speak for thousands, but reaching the so-called silent youth – those who do not take part in politics – remains a significant challenge.

A peer-to-peer approach was suggested as an effective strategy to increase inclusion. By encouraging active young people to engage their peers and help them see themselves as part of a larger community, participation can be broadened. When young people begin to identify with a collective purpose and see themselves as part of a larger community, they are more likely to become involved.

Participants also emphasised the need for diverse and flexible methods to strengthen children's right to be heard. Establishing digital participation structures such as online platforms can help reach a wider and more diverse population of children and youth, including those who may not engage through traditional participatory channels.

Following a crisis, it is vital to consult children and youth through established structured platforms. Clear feedback loops and consistent follow-up are vital to ensure that their contributions are acknowledged and acted upon. In addition, conducting longitudinal research and preparing well-functioning structures before crises occur are crucial steps toward an effective and inclusive response. These steps are key to building a more effective and resilient system that includes children's voices from the outset.

What's working in the Nordics

During the workshop, several encouraging examples were shared, illustrating how children and youth have been meaningfully included across the Nordic region.



Faroe Islands: Young people were invited to express their visions for their home environments through drawing and painting, offering a creative and inclusive method of participation.



Iceland: The Ombudsperson's office engaged an entire age group of children in discussions around the theme of togetherness, encouraging them to share their feelings and experiences. The insights gathered were later gathered and compiled into a report and presented to government ministers.



Sweden: An initiative provided youth with summer jobs where they are empowered to design and implement solutions to local challenges within their communities.

These examples demonstrate the diversity of approaches and the potential for meaningful youth engagement when creativity, trust, and institutional support are combined.

Making space for youth in crisis response

As part of the workshop, participants were asked to develop proposals for a Youth Crisis Response Team to enhance meaningful participation in emergency contexts.

One suggestion was to establish teams where young people are represented alongside adults and integrated into schools, like student councils. These teams should have clearly identified responsibilities and be actively involved in decision-making.

The inclusion of student organisations, civil society, and public authorities was seen as essential, with NGOs playing a key role in identifying and reaching vulnerable children. Such teams should exist at all governance levels, from local to international.

Another proposal recommended organising the team with two distinct groups – one comprising children and the other adults – to ensure children have a genuine and independent voice. Adults would be expected to engage respectfully with youth, potentially through collaboration with participants from various existing student councils. This model promotes inclusive collaboration and ensures that youth perspectives are taken seriously and integrated into crisis response efforts.

Practical approaches for effective involvement

The workshop showed that young people are ready and willing to contribute to crisis planning and decision-making. Their input reflected a strong desire for meaningful participation both during emergencies and as a part of everyday structures. Key themes included the need for trust between youth and adults, better access to information, and more inclusive platforms, both digital and in schools. The proposals were grounded in real experiences and aimed at creating lasting change.

Throughout the workshop, it became clear that young people are both willing and fully capable of contributing to crisis planning and decision-making when given the chance. The discussions were thoughtful, creative, and grounded in lived experience. What stood out most was the shared understanding that participation must be built before a crisis hits. It cannot be improvised.

The young participants expressed a strong desire to be seen as partners, not just recipients of decisions made by adults. They want to be involved early, consistently, and meaningfully. They want their ideas to be taken seriously – not out of courtesy, but because they have something valuable to offer. And they want structures that make this possible, not just promises.

The proposals, ranging from Youth Crisis Response Teams to digital tools and peer-to-peer outreach, offer practical approaches to involving young people more effectively. They suggest ways for decision-makers, schools, civil society, and governments to strengthen collaboration and to work differently.

Child Rights Impact Assessment – a practical tool for decision-makers

A Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) is a practical tool that helps decision-makers evaluate how laws, policies, or reforms may affect children's lives. It ensures that children's voices are heard, their rights protected, and their needs taken seriously, especially in times of crisis.

Purpose: To evaluate the potential impact on children's rights of a decision before it is made.

Why use it: Children often don't have a say in decisions that affect them. CRIAs help to make their needs and perspectives visible.

When to use it: Before introducing new laws, policies, or major changes to services, such as education, health, or housing.

Who uses it: Governments, public bodies, and sometimes private organisations.

Based on: The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly Article 12.

What does a CRIA look at?

- Will the decision protect children's safety and well-being?
- Does it support their rights to education, health, and play?
- Are all children treated fairly, including those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged?

How is this relevant to article 12?

Children have the right to express their views on matters that affect them, and these views must be taken seriously.

Children should therefore be involved in assessing how decisions might affect them. A robust CRIA incorporates children's perspectives rather than relying on adults' assumptions about what is best for them.

European network of Ombudspersons for Children (2020)



Country report Denmark

Authors: Anna Marie Schurmann Carstens and Andrea Langergaard Nicolaisen

The Danish National Council for Children (Børnerådet) functions as the primary body advocating for children's rights, as Denmark does not have a standalone Children's Ombudsman. The Council is an independent national institution established to promote children's rights and interests in Denmark. Its primary responsibility is to monitor the implementation of children's rights in Danish law and administrative practices, ensuring that Denmark complies with the obligations it undertook upon ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991. The UNCRC is incorporated into Danish national law, and the Council plays a key role in making sure that children's rights are respected in all areas of society.

The Danish National Council for Children was formally established in 1994 and operates as an advisory body to the Danish government. Its mission is to ensure that children's voices are heard and that their rights are safeguarded across various policy areas, from education to healthcare. The Council works closely with both national and international institutions to raise awareness about children's rights.

Denmark's next report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is to be submitted in 2026, and a hearing by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is to be held in 2027.

Lack of formal procedures to ensure children's right to be heard in policymaking

There is a growing focus in Denmark on involving children and young people. More and more public authorities are exploring the potential of initiatives such as children's and youth panels. However, there is still considerable room for improvement in establishing formal platforms to ensure children's right to be heard in all matters that affect them.

This was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. Denmark was one of the first countries in Europe to enter a nationwide lockdown, taking quite restrictive preventive measures at a very early stage to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

For children and young people, this meant school closures, restrictions on leisure activities, and limited opportunities for social interaction and communication. All of this had a significant impact on children's well-being.

Yet their voices and perspectives were largely absent from policy-making processes, which were primarily based on health considerations and the desire to minimise the risk of infection in the wider population. Children and young people were not specifically consulted in the decision-making process, nor were decisions accompanied by explicit Child Rights Impact Assessments.

Tools for parents and professionals and financial support for children's and youth organisations

The Danish authorities took responsibility for some initiatives aimed at providing parents and professionals close to children with tools to talk to them about their experiences when the pandemic was at its peak and schools and leisure activities were closed and replaced by online education. For example, the Danish Public Health Authority developed materials for schools and parents to help them talk to children about Covid-19 and their experiences (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2020).

In addition, [the political parties in the Danish Parliament initiated several economic support packages](#), with one of the aims to [help children's and youth organisations to intensify their work with vulnerable children and young people](#).

The financial support and coordinated cooperation between relevant organisations should ensure that organisations and institutions already in contact with children have the opportunity to be present through the crisis with relevant initiatives and advice.

Communication to and engaging of children and young people in the public debate

Much of the communication with children – and the inclusion of children's voices in the public debate during the pandemic – took place through DR Ultra, a TV channel for children and young people on Denmark's largest state-funded media, Danmarks Radio. For example, [DR Ultra created some special programmes where children had the opportunity to ask virus experts about their concerns and experiences.](#)

In addition, [the Prime Minister attended several press conferences during the lockdown, where DR Ultra's child reporters had the opportunity to ask questions about Covid-19 from their own perspective and experience.](#)

Research on the Covid-19 crisis concerning the participation of children and the effect on children

The limited research on children's participation likely reflects the fact that children were not systematically involved in decision-making by authorities.

The few studies that have been done were mostly undertaken after the Covid-19 crisis and were mostly local, such as [a study in Herning Municipality on how children aged 3–6 years experienced daycare centres on returning to these during the Covid-19 restrictions.](#) The Danish Authority of Social Services and Housing conducted a survey in Danish municipalities about their first experiences with Covid-19 in the area of vulnerable children and found both positive and negative consequences of the closure (Socialstyrelsen, 2022). VIVE's study on families with younger children and their experiences during Covid-19 (Lau-Jensen Hirani et al., 2021) is also relevant. For a thorough overview of the facts on studies and research, see the report on Children and young people's participation during the corona pandemic: Nordic initiatives by researchers Alix Helfer, Viola Särkiluoto, and Sinikka Aapola-Kari from the Finnish Youth Research Society and Jakob Trane Ibsen from VIVE , The Danish Centre for Social Science Research (2023).

Lessons learned and challenges

- Lack of structured mechanisms for involving children and young people in decision-making in times of crisis, such as school closures which were decided solely on health grounds and did not give due weight to children's perspectives.
- Increased mental health problems among children and young people as a result of the lockdown, with vulnerable children at particular risk. The normal safety net of professionals providing information to the community was severely weakened by the presence of children only at home.

- An increase in unsafe environmental problems for vulnerable children as they had to stay at home and were unable to seek protection, e.g. at school or during leisure activities. Teachers, educators and others were unable to identify the needs of children when they were not in contact with them.
- Increased use of digital platforms for education and communication was not always sufficient for meaningful participation.

Recommendations for future crisis

- Develop a national strategy for involving children in crisis-related decision-making, with a formalised mechanism to ensure their involvement.
- Undertake Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) to ensure that all potential consequences for the well-being and rights of children and young people are taken into account in decision-making processes.
- To produce a synthesis of studies, evaluations, and research shedding light on the impact of the management of the Covid-19 crisis on children and young people, with a view to conducting future Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA).

Challenges where Nordic co-operation can contribute

The Nordic countries could benefit from sharing their experiences of legislation, practices, and methods to ensure that children's rights are heard in times of crisis, in order to recommend well-founded practices and methods for the future.

It would also be important to look at how the different Nordic countries' strategies for dealing with the Covid-19 crisis have affected children and young people both during and after the crisis.

Furthermore, by ensuring that children's voices are consistently included in decision-making processes, increased cooperation can help to promote a stronger, more unified approach to the challenges faced by children in crisis situations.

Follow-up initiatives after Covid-19

There were various follow-up initiatives, including both national and local activities to promote well-being in schools.

In relation to children's right to be heard, the most important follow-up initiative was [the government's establishment of a special youth panel](#). The panel had to work quickly and make [recommendations on how to promote young people's well-being in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis](#).

Proposals for Nordic co-operation

Joint declaration

In light of the recent global and regional challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need for stronger Nordic cooperation to ensure the protection and participation of children in times of crisis. To this end, we encourage the Nordic countries to explore the possibility of adopting a joint declaration reaffirming their shared commitment to the protection of children's rights in exceptional circumstances.

Such a declaration would serve as a political and moral basis for integrating a child rights perspective in all phases of crisis preparedness, response, and recovery.

On-set collaboration

This initiative could include the development of a common approach to ensuring that children are meaningfully involved in decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. By committing to the use of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) as a part of crisis response mechanisms, the Nordic countries would further strengthen their commitment to the principles enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, enhanced cooperation could help promote child-friendly communication strategies and strengthen the role of independent institutions, such as national ombudspersons, in guiding and supporting national efforts.

In parallel, it is suggested that the Nordic countries consider establishing a more structured and operational form of cooperation that can be activated in the early stages of a crisis. Such a mechanism could facilitate the timely sharing of knowledge, tools, and expertise and support the alignment of practices between national systems. By building on existing trust and shared values, this framework could enhance the Nordic countries' ability to respond to crises in a coordinated, efficient, and child-focused manner. The experience of previous emergencies could very well act as a mechanism for continuous learning and adaptation for governments and professionals to be used in the event of future crises.

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Country report Finland

Author: Terhi Tuukkanen

The Finnish Children's Ombudsman is an independent state institution established to promote children's rights and interests in Finland. Its primary responsibility is to ensure that Finnish law and administrative practices align with the obligations Finland undertook when ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991. The UNCRC is incorporated into Finnish national law, and the Ombudsman plays a crucial role in ensuring that children's rights are respected and protected across all sectors of society.

The Finnish Children's Ombudsman was established in 2005 as a response to the growing recognition of the need to protect children's rights in Finland. The Ombudsman's role is to monitor and assess children's living conditions, provide guidance to the government, and advocate policies that safeguard children's best interests. The ombudsman's work spans a wide range of areas, including education, child protection, health care, and social services.

The Ombudsman is appointed for a term of five years, with the possibility of reappointment. Elina Pekkarinen serves as Finland's Ombudsman for Children; she was appointed in 2019 and for the second term in 2024. Elina Pekkarinen also holds the position of Chairperson of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC). She was elected Chairperson-elect at ENOC's 27th General Assembly in Brussels on September 21, 2023. She became Chairperson in September 2024.

Elina Pekkarinen also holds the position of Chairperson of the [European Network of Ombudspersons for Children \(ENOC\)](#). She was elected Chairperson-elect at ENOC's 27th General Assembly in Brussels on September 21, 2023. She became Chairperson in September 2024.

Finland's most recent report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was submitted in 2019, and the hearing by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was in 2023. The Finnish Children's Ombudsman remains committed to ensuring that Finland meets its obligations under the UNCRC and to advocating for a society that prioritises the rights and well-being of children.

Impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the right of the child to participate in all matters affecting the child: key challenges

In Finland, the everyday lives of children were significantly restricted during the coronavirus pandemic. The restrictions affected issues such as studying, healthcare and social welfare, leisure time, and social relationships. The pandemic and the related restrictive measures led to a decline in the opportunities for children to make decisions related to their own lives.

While the restrictions imposed directly affected children, their voices were often left unheard during decision-making or they were only heard after the decisions had been made (Helfer & Aapola-Kari, 2023; Panula et al., 2023). During the pandemic, the Ombudsman for Children emphasised the importance of assessing the impacts of decisions on children. However, only in rare cases was the Ombudsman for Children informed about situations where children's opinions had been heard when deciding on different measures.

A publication by the Coronavirus Working Group, which was set up under the [National Child Strategy](#), revealed a significant shortcoming in the provision of information to children during the pandemic. Notably, there was a lack of targeted communication for young children and those belonging to minority groups (Finnish Government, 2021; Helfer, 2023). Throughout the pandemic, the Ombudsman for Children consistently emphasised the need for improved dissemination of information concerning children at national and municipal levels.

Elina Pekkarinen, the Ombudsman for Children, also served as an expert member of the government-appointed Scientific Panel on Coronavirus. The panel's report stressed the importance of upholding children's right to participate (Finnish Government, 2020). In response, the government organised two information sessions dedicated to children. Several public authorities, including the Finnish Broadcasting Company and [the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare](#), also produced child-friendly communications via social media platforms.

It is hard to assess the effectiveness of the measures in the absence of systematic retrospective evaluations. However, it is evident that the information sessions and social media outreach did not reach all children. Communication efforts were insufficient for very young children and children with disabilities, highlighting a persistent gap in inclusive and accessible information during crises.

Initiatives for enhancing future preparedness in Finland

As the pandemic progressed, efforts to assess the impact of the virus on children and to incorporate their perspectives increased notably. A prominent example comes from the preparation of temporary amendments to the Basic Education Act and the Act on European Schooling in Helsinki. In this context, the Ministry of Education and Culture conducted a national online survey of pupils in basic education, gathering insights about their experiences during spring and early autumn 2020 (Niemelä et al., 2020). Remarkably, over 58,000 pupils responded, showing that large-scale surveys with children can be successfully implemented, even within tight timeframes. The results provided valuable input for legislative processes (Pekkarinen, 2022).

This approach has continued beyond the pandemic. For example, in 2022, the Ministry of Finance conducted a survey to explore the views of children and young people aged 10–17 on the use of public funds. Nearly 7,000 children participated, offering insights into how public spending priorities are perceived by younger citizens (Järvenpää, 2022). These examples illustrate a growing recognition of children's right to be heard on matters affecting them and demonstrate the practical feasibility of including their views in policymaking.

Even before the onset of the pandemic, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children had enhanced children's inclusion as part of the agency's strategy. During the pandemic, the Ombudsman also met with children as part of the Young Advisers operating model, which involves discussions with different groups of children representing various aspects of children's lives and everyday realities. In accordance with this model, the Ombudsman organises six to ten meetings annually with different groups of children across Finland. Additionally, the Ombudsman carries out the Child Barometer, a telephone survey examining the lives of children aged 6–7. The Barometer aims to examine children's own views on issues that affect them. This study has been conducted every two years, including during the 2020 and 2022 pandemics. In 2020, the Child Barometer telephone interviews took place in April, at a time when pre-primary education instruction was mainly provided remotely.

The Office of the Ombudsman for Children also produces separate reports and other publications. In autumn 2020, the Ombudsman for Children asked children about their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic and published the results (Kekkonen, 2021). Third graders were invited to draw, paint, and write about their experiences of the virus. This showed that minor adjustments can be made to

collect the views of large groups of children, and that it is important to offer children several ways to express their experiences and thoughts (Pekkarinen, 2022).

Although children's right to participate was not fully realised during the pandemic, significant steps have since been taken to strengthen it through various national programmes and policy measures. The Implementation Plan for the National Child Strategy includes concrete actions aimed at enhancing children's participation rights (Finnish Government, 2021). Similarly, [the National Democracy Programme](#), which runs until 2027, explicitly prioritises the inclusion of children in democratic processes.

The Open Government Action Plan also outlines measures to promote children's inclusion in public decision-making, further reinforcing this commitment. Encouragingly, the updated Consultation Guide for Legislative Drafting – a key resource for law drafters – now highlights [the principles, importance, and practical guidance for consulting with children](#).

In early 2025, the Ministry of Justice published a comprehensive report summarising the lessons learned from previous attempts to hear the views of children. The report also offers recommendations for improving participation and consultation methods with children and young people in central government projects and programmes (Haltia-Nurmi et al., 2025).

Taken together, these developments reflect a growing recognition in Finland of children's right to be heard in matters affecting them, both individually and collectively. This principle is becoming increasingly embedded in national governance frameworks and legislative processes.

A concrete example of how to strengthen children's opportunities for participation is the [Digiraati digital panel](#), which was introduced on a large scale in 2024. Digiraati is an online service developed and managed by the Ministry of Justice. This free service enables people under the age of 29 to express their views on societal issues. Through the service, children and young people can participate in discussions on various topics. A final statement on the topic discussed by the panel is formed, published in the service, and forwarded by the panel organiser to the relevant parties. Panels can be organised by ministries, municipalities, wellbeing service counties, other authorities, schools, educational institutions, or non-governmental organisations.

Conclusion

In Finland, the right of the child to participate has long been recognised as a fundamental principle. This commitment was evident even before the onset of the pandemic, as demonstrated by the country's participation in the piloting of the Child Participation Assessment Tool developed by the Council of Europe in 2016, under the leadership of the Ministry of Justice. The resulting assessment report,

published in 2020, concluded that, although Finnish legislation and participation structures largely support children's right to be heard, considerable room for improvement remains in terms of practical implementation and communication. The report particularly emphasised the need to strengthen alternative and inclusive forms of participation beyond representative structures to ensure that all children, including those in vulnerable situations, have equal opportunities to express their views and influence decisions (Ministry of Justice, 2020).

The findings were further emphasised by the pandemic. Although the principle of child participation was acknowledged in pandemic-related decision-making, it was not effectively implemented in practice. Children had limited opportunities to influence decisions that directly affected their lives. Subsequent research has shown that children's perspectives should have been considered more systematically before restrictions were imposed, as these measures had a significant negative impact on their well-being, learning, and sense of inclusion (Gyllenberg et al., 2023; Panula et al., 2023; Residori et al., 2023).

According to the Ombudsman for Children, it is essential to be better prepared for future crises. As a result, in 2022, the Ombudsman urged central government authorities to update their preparedness for crises from the perspective of children. The Ombudsman for Children noted that little attention is paid to children in the preparedness for various accidents and crises, even though they are in a more vulnerable position than adults due to their age and level of development. The Ombudsman stressed that during crises, it is important for children and young people to feel that they are part of a community where they receive age-appropriate information about the situation and have a say on matters (Mettinen & Pekkarinen, 2022).

The pandemic also revealed a tendency to treat children as a homogeneous group, neglecting their individual differences. Consequently, those already facing challenges, such as children with disabilities, those from minority backgrounds, and those in precarious family situations, were disproportionately affected (Panula et al., 2023; see also Helfer, 2023).

This highlights the critical importance of conducting comprehensive child impact assessments prior to decision-making. Such assessments must ensure that children from a wide range of backgrounds are given meaningful opportunities to express their views. It is not enough to simply collect input; the process must be inclusive, and the outcomes must genuinely influence decisions. Equally important is the need to communicate decisions in ways that are accessible and understandable to children, considering their age, developmental stage, and individual circumstances.

Ultimately, the goal is to move beyond symbolic participation and toward a model where children's perspectives are actively integrated into policy and practice, ensuring that no child is left unheard or unseen in matters that affect their lives.

In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued its concluding

observations on Finland, placing strong emphasis on children's right to participate. The Committee reiterated many of the concerns highlighted in recent national assessments and called for concrete action to address them. Specifically, the Committee urged Finland to guarantee that all children can express their views and be heard in all decision-making processes, including judicial and administrative proceedings, without the need for parental or guardian consent.

Furthermore, the Committee recommended that Finland adopt legislative reforms to guarantee that the views of children of all ages are systematically considered in decision-making processes. The Committee also stressed the importance of promoting the inclusion of all children, regardless of background or circumstance, within families, schools, and communities.

These recommendations reflect the broader understanding that listening to children enhances societal well-being as well as fulfilling their rights. When children's perspectives are genuinely valued and integrated into decision-making processes, this leads to more inclusive, responsive, and effective policies that benefit everyone.

List of recommendations

Based on the findings presented in this report, the Finnish Children's Ombudsman recommends the following actions to strengthen children's right to participate in all matters affecting them:

1. Guarantee the child's right to participation in all contexts

The children's right to participate in and influence decisions affecting them must be upheld in all circumstances, including ongoing crises. Children's views should be systematically gathered and considered as part of all child impact assessments.

2. Integrate a child-centred perspective into crisis preparedness

Contingency and preparedness plans must explicitly include the needs and rights of children. These plans must ensure that children and young people receive timely, age-appropriate information, and that they are given meaningful opportunities to express their views and to feel that they are part of a supportive community.

3. Recognise and respond to the diversity of children

Child impact assessments must take into account the diversity of children's experiences and identities. This involves identifying and consulting with various groups of children, including those with disabilities, from minority backgrounds, or in vulnerable situations to ensure their perspectives are reflected in decision-making processes.

4. Implement the UN Committee's recommendations.

The recommendations issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in

2023 regarding children's right to participation should be translated into concrete legislative and policy measures. This includes ensuring that children of all ages can express their views in all relevant proceedings without requiring parental consent.

5. Strengthen Nordic co-operation.

Regional co-operation should be enhanced to support the implementation of these recommendations. Nordic countries should exchange experiences, share good practices, and collaborate on developing inclusive and effective models for child participation.

For instance, a shared Nordic framework for Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) with common tools, training, and peer learning would strengthen the region's ability to uphold children's right to be heard. Embedding CRIA into emergency preparedness not only ensures that decisions affecting children are inclusive and rights-based but also enhances cost-efficiency by pooling educational and institutional resources across borders. This collaborative approach supports the vision of a more integrated and sustainable Nordic region, where child participation is a core element of resilient crisis response systems.

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Country report Faroe Islands

Author: Hanna Vang

Løgtingsins umboðsmaður/The Faroese Children's Ombudsman. The current Faroese Children's Ombudsman is Hanna Vang. She was elected by the Faroese Parliament as Parliamentary Ombudsman in 2020. Her role involves monitoring governmental and local authorities to safeguard the rights of citizens, including children.

The latest Faroese report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was submitted in 2016, and a hearing by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is expected in 2025.

The status of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Faroese legislation

The Faroe Islands have adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and thereby committed to complying with it. However, the Convention has not been enacted as law in the Faroe Islands, which means that citizens cannot directly invoke the Convention against Faroese authorities. The Parliamentary Ombudsman of the Faroe Islands has been asked by the Parliament to oversee the compliance with the Convention within the framework of the Ombudsman's mandate, as an independent complaint and supervisory authority.

The basis for the status report is an evaluation from the Prime Minister's Office, January 2023

The description below of the situation in the Faroe Islands in connection with

Covid-19 refers to, and is based on, an evaluation report from January 2023 from the Prime Minister's Office. The focus of the government report was to evaluate how the Faroe Islands managed the Covid-19 crisis. Prior to the evaluation, the Prime Minister's Office conducted a broad hearing in society, where both authorities and organisations had the opportunity to give their views on the matter.

The evaluation is in Faroese and can be found on [the web page of the Prime Minister's Office](#). For the most part, the report consists of summaries and partial excerpts of the points in the government's evaluation that I find relevant as regards Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (Hanna Vangs comments are marked as quotes).

The Faroe Islands' large capacity for Covid-19 testing and quarantine as a strategy

The Faroe Islands had relatively few deaths as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. The islands have a large capacity for conducting Covid-19 tests, and quarantine was used as a strategy for long periods.

The Faroe Islands' use of recommendations instead of legislation

A distinctive feature of how the Faroe Islands managed the crisis was that recommendations were mostly used instead of legislation. This gave the authorities the opportunity to adopt a more flexible approach: recommendations could be changed and implemented more readily than actual legislation.

However, the downside was that recommendations could be difficult to interpret and implement in some areas. The recommendations were to be implemented in a decentralised manner and largely relied on voluntary compliance, for example in the various schools. According to the evaluation, this could, for instance, lead to practical difficulties in ensuring the recommendations for safe distancing among children in the schoolyard.

In a paper, the Association of Legal Professionals posed the question why the political system and citizens did not more strongly criticise the way the government managed the country through recommendations rather than legislation (Hansen & Rasmussen, 2021).

- While there are legal concerns that may arise from recommendations-based regulation, this approach is likely to have allowed more flexible organisation in individual places and the ability to take into account more specifically the considerations for the children on site. (Vang)

Children's perspectives highlighted in the implementation of measures

During the onset of the crisis and throughout the period, the elderly sector was a significant focus, as it involved a vulnerable group. The school and sports sectors also received relatively significant attention, which naturally involved considerations regarding children's conditions. However, there is no information that children's perspectives were directly highlighted in connection with the measures concerning them.

A central part of crisis management involved the Epidemic Commission, established under the Epidemic Act. The purpose of the Epidemic Act is to prevent the spread of dangerous diseases in the Faroe Islands, and the Epidemic Commission has the authority to make decisions in this regard. The Commission can, for example, implement preventive measures in connection with infectious diseases. The commission was staffed with medical professionals and a range of representatives from the police, veterinary authorities, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Health, National Hospital, and tax authorities.

The Epidemic Commission functioned mostly as an advisory body to the government in their handling of the Covid-19 crisis. The government evaluation indicates that the absence of representatives for the elderly sector in the commission was identified as problematic.

– Also, the Epidemic Commission did not have direct representatives or spokespersons for children's perspectives. Later in the process, around January 2022, the commission was expanded to include a psychologist who could advise on psychological issues and assess the psychological consequences of planned recommendations. It must be assumed that the expansion with a psychologist has also meant considering the psychological impact on children, but it is not clear to what extent. (Vang)

Deterioration of public services

The government evaluation indicates that many public services deteriorated during the Covid-19 period because all non-essential activities had to be temporarily suspended.

– It must be assumed that a reduction and deterioration of public services during the period have affected a broad range of citizens, including children.

– However, it is my impression that the Covid-19 crisis impacted children's lives in the Faroe Islands to a lesser extent than in our neighbouring countries. I say this because of the relatively short period of lockdown and because most citizens in the Faroe Islands have easy access to open nature regardless of lockdown or

quarantine. Measures of quarantine or lockdown were also lifted relatively quickly on schools and sports activities. (Vang)

Education sector

In the education sector, the biggest challenge according to the government evaluation was reaching all students through remote learning. The difference between resource-rich and resource-poor families became more apparent during this period, as the extent to which different homes engaged in homeschooling varied. In primary schools, the evaluation mentions that creative subjects suffered during the crisis.

Interestingly, all the schools consulted highlighted the benefits of the shorter school day, as students became more motivated and lessons more effective. In high schools and universities, the evaluation indicates that the Covid-19 crisis affected students' social lives and that remote learning can never be as effective as in-person teaching.

Reports on the evaluation within the education sector indicated that schools focused on teaching, their core mission. In this regard, schools tried to organise their work according to the circumstances, keeping the risk of infection in mind. There were psychological challenges due to the Covid-19 crisis both among staff and students, and stress-related sick leave occurred.

The government concludes the evaluation in the education sector by stating that the most important lesson may have been that relationships between students and teachers and among students are crucial for learning.

The Ombudsman's concluding remarks

- As mentioned, the Ombudsman has not conducted qualitative or quantitative studies regarding children's conditions and voices during the Covid-19 crisis. This article is therefore a selection and partial discussion of the Prime Minister's Office Covid-19 evaluation report.
- It is my impression that the Covid-19 crisis impacted children's lives in the Faroe Islands to a lesser extent than in our neighbouring countries. I say this because of the relatively short period of lockdown and because most citizens in the Faroe Islands have easy access to open nature, where they could go regardless of lockdown or quarantine. Measures of quarantine or lockdown were also lifted relatively quickly on schools and sports activities.
- I do not have any data on this, but I must assume that the use of recommendations, which were to be implemented locally, regardless of legal concerns, have served to some extent as a tool of considering locally children's conditions and voices in the development of procedures.
- The Epidemic Commission did not include a specific voice only for children, but it was staffed with health professionals and others with insight into children, and it was expanded to include a psychologist during the process. With this staffing, I must assume that it was possible to consider children's physical and psychological conditions. (Vang)

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Country report Greenland

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MIO, Meeqqat Pisinnaatitaaffiut Sullissivik/Greenland's Child Rights Institution.

MIO is a national child rights institution in Greenland, which specialises in children's participation and has a strong focus on compliance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The position of Head of MIO is designated as the Spokesperson for Children in Greenland. MIO is actively engaged in ensuring that children and young people in Greenland are involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives. To this end, the institution conducts surveys, travels around Greenland, and collects data and statements from children and young people to understand their perspectives and challenges.

To strengthen children's rights, MIO collaborates with a number of actors such as the Children's Alliance, Tilioq (working for the rights of people with disabilities), and [the Human Rights Council of Greenland](#).

The impact of Covid-19 management on children and young people in Greenland

Greenland experienced a unique situation during the course of the pandemic of the coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2: there were very few cases and deaths, primarily due to the rapid closure of the borders. This resulted in the lowest frequency of infections with the virus among the Arctic regions. Measures such as remote learning and working from home were quickly implemented but lasted only a few weeks. The Spokesperson for Children, Head of MIO, Greenland's Child Rights Institution, observed fewer negative consequences for children and young people compared to

other countries.

Overview of pandemic handling in Greenland

The first case of the novel coronavirus was reported on 16 March 2020, and following the second case on 18 March 2020, the capital Nuuk was completely isolated from other towns. Remote teaching and working from home became the norm for many, albeit only for a few weeks. Travel restrictions were implemented, permitting only essential travel in and out of the country with explicit permission, and resulting in a significant decrease in the number of travellers, from 1,000 per week to just 64 per week. These measures included mandatory PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests prior to departure for Greenland, followed by quarantine and further testing upon arrival.

Several restrictions were implemented, including the requirement for corona passports and face masks, an alcohol ban in three municipalities, travel restrictions between municipalities and cities/villages, bans on gatherings, and special restrictions for children and young people.

Challenges for children and youth well-being

The pandemic posed challenges for children and young people in Greenland. Of Greenlandic families with children under 18, 17% live in overcrowded homes, which shook the right to the highest attainable standard of health and put additional pressure on already vulnerable families (Institut for Menneskerettigheder, 2020).

The mental health of children and young people deteriorated (Erlangsen et al., 2024), prompting the Government of Greenland to set up a corona hotline under [the existing Tusaannga helpline](#).

Some families affected by the virus encountered financial difficulties due to the necessity of caring for infected children or those classified as close contacts, resulting in a loss of income and, in some cases, inability to meet basic needs such as food. The country's shelters experienced an increase in inquiries, and parents expressed frustration regarding the special restrictions imposed on children and young people, who were not permitted in shops and restaurants for a period but were allowed in schools with high infection rates. On the positive side, the government focused on not excluding children from important communities, and as a result, children returned to school fairly quickly and were also allowed to return to extracurricular activities relatively quickly, albeit with certain restrictions.

Consequences for children's right to be heard

The pandemic led to several challenges for children's right to be heard as outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Overcrowded homes,

where 17% of families live with children under 18, challenged their right to the highest attainable standard of health. The mental health of children and young people deteriorated, and the government established a corona hotline for children under the existing Tusaannga helpline. Economic difficulties also arose, as families lost income due to infection or quarantine, leading to increased demand for crisis centre services.

Children were not involved in the restrictions placed on them, nor has there been any subsequent follow-up on what consequences the children themselves experienced during Covid-19. Therefore, from a Greenlandic perspective, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive analysis of the consequences for children, as they have not been asked.

There is a general lack of awareness and understanding among adults about the importance of listening to children and involving them in decision-making processes. Children and young people have limited opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives, both locally and nationally. The principle of the best interests of the child is not consistently implemented in all decision-making processes affecting children. Professionals working with children often lack adequate training on how to assess and implement this principle.

Recommendations for national improvements

Inclusion in legislation: Integrate children's right to be heard into national legislation and policies, ensuring that this right is practised in all relevant sectors. This could involve revising existing laws and regulations to include provisions that ensure children's participation and influence in matters affecting them.

Training and awareness-raising: Increase awareness among adults, including teachers and decision-makers, about children's right to be heard. There is a need for training and resources to ensure that adults understand and respect this right. This could include developing training programmes and workshops for professionals working with children, as well as information campaigns aimed at parents and the general community.

Specific measures for vulnerable groups: Implement specific measures to ensure that vulnerable groups of children, including children with disabilities, also have their right to be heard fulfilled. This could involve developing tailored communication tools and methods to ensure that all children, regardless of their background or abilities, can express their views and participate in decision-making processes.

Proposals for Nordic co-operation in the area

Mental health support: The strengthening of mental health services for children and young people across the Nordic region, especially during crises, should be recommended. This could involve the establishment of common Nordic guidelines for mental health, the sharing of best practices, and the development of collaborative projects to improve the availability and quality of mental health services for children and young people.

Economic assistance: The development of programmes to provide economic support to families during crises is to be recommended. This could entail the establishment of joint Nordic funds or support schemes that can be activated during crises to ensure that families receive the financial assistance they require to maintain a stable and secure daily life.

Rapid response mechanisms: The establishment of protocols for rapid and effective responses to future pandemics is also recommended. This could involve the development of joint Nordic contingency plans, the conducting of joint exercises and simulations, and the establishment of cooperation mechanisms to ensure a coordinated and effective response across borders.

In summary, while Greenland's swift and stringent measures resulted in a low infection rate and fewer adverse effects on children and young people compared to other countries, the pandemic still posed challenges for some children, particularly for their mental health and well-being. It is recommended that awareness is increased and specific measures are implemented for vulnerable groups to ensure that the rights of children, particularly the right to be heard as outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, are upheld in future crises.

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Country report Iceland

Author: Sigurveig Thorhallsdottir and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in Iceland

The Ombudsman for Children in Iceland is an independent body that was established in 1995. The ombudsman is appointed by the Prime Minister, who also oversees the Office's finances. The Ombudsman submits an annual report to the Prime Minister on the Office activities. Further information on the role of the Ombudsman for Children can be found in the Act on the Office, No. 83/1994. The Ombudsman for Children serves as a public advocate for children and works to ensure that their rights, needs, and interests are fully considered. Anyone may contact the Ombudsman, and inquiries from children are given priority. The Ombudsman does not handle disputes between individuals, such as those between children and parents or between guardians and institutions. Also, the Ombudsman does not have the authority to review government decisions in individual cases nor is it permitted to intervene in matters concerning individual children that are being handled by other authorities or institutions.

The duties of the Ombudsman for Children include monitoring the development and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is enshrined in Icelandic law, providing education about the Convention to both children and adults and promoting compliance with it and other international agreements related to the rights and welfare of children. The Office also puts forward suggestions and proposals for improvements that affect the interests of children across all areas of society. The Ombudsman gathers and disseminates data about children and the status of specific groups of children and works to promote children's participation. In addition, the Office raises public awareness of legislation and legal provisions concerning children and advocates for research in this area. Every other year, the Ombudsman for Children convenes a national Children's Forum. The first Children's Forum was held in November 2019.

Children in Iceland played an active role in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, making a significant contribution to protecting vital societal interests, including public health. It is the opinion of the Ombudsman for Children that while the need for swift action during the pandemic was understandable, many decisions that negatively affected children were made without their input or that of their representatives, and without prior assessment of the potential impact on them. As a result, measures to mitigate the pandemic's negative effects on children could not be effectively implemented.

Schools and education

Between 31 December 2019 and 25 February 2022, Iceland implemented 55 regulations affecting school operations due to Covid-19. When special regulations were not in place, schools were still subjected to public health restrictions on gatherings and proximity. The first regulation took effect on 16 March 2020, coinciding with general gathering restrictions. From 25 February 2022, all restrictions on school operations ended, alongside the repeal of isolation rules, border measures, and general gathering limits under Regulation No. 219/2022. This extensive regulatory framework had a significant impact on children's education (Bernharðsdóttir et al., 2022).

According to information obtained by the Ombudsman from the Directorate of Health, most Icelandic children experienced quarantine at least once, with over a thousand children placed in quarantine more than four times (Aspelund & Nordal, 2022). As a result, many children missed weeks or even months of schooling and extracurricular activities in addition to the general restrictions that applied to all children. The Ombudsman therefore urged the Ministry of Education and Children to address the inconsistency in the support provided by schools to children in isolation or quarantine (Nordal, 2022). To ensure equitable access to education during a crisis, the Ministry must issue clear guidelines for schools on how to support affected children.

Many schools turned to digital learning in response to restrictions. While this demonstrated a positive effort to maintain education despite the challenges, digital learning also introduced new obstacles. Although approximately 98% of Icelandic households have internet access (ECOI, 2024), some families still lack a stable connection or the necessary devices, such as computers or tablets. To ensure equal access to education, schools need clearer guidance on considering the needs of all students before implementing digital learning. Schools should assess whether all children have the required internet access and equipment. If not, special measures must be taken, such as providing necessary devices or offering access to designated school facilities, allowing all students to continue their education on an equal footing with their peers.

Testing, vaccinations and quarantine

The Ombudsman for Children was compelled to act when the number of children infected with Covid-19, including very young children and infants, began to rise rapidly toward the end of 2021. As a result, large numbers of children were subjected to PCR testing under conditions that were not child friendly. Many had to wait in long queues outside in cold winter weather and undergo testing in environments unsuitable for their needs, causing them unnecessary stress. Additionally, the staff conducting the tests were not licensed healthcare professionals and lacked training in working with children. Following the Ombudsman's intervention, important changes were made, children were tested separately, allowed to skip ahead in queues, and assigned specifically selected testing staff. However, this highlights that many decisions made during the pandemic that directly impacted children were implemented without prior consideration of their needs and rights (Ombudsman for Children in Iceland, 2022).

In August 2021, the Ministry of Health announced that children aged 12–15 would be offered vaccination against Covid-19. Vaccinations were scheduled to begin just 11 days after the announcement. At that time, the World Health Organization had not yet recommended general vaccinations for children, and misinformation regarding the vaccines and their potential side effects was widespread. The Ombudsman emphasised the importance of providing parents with sufficient information and time to make informed decisions with their children.

In January 2022, the Ministry of Health announced that children aged 5–11 would be offered vaccinations against Covid-19 upon request by their guardian. This time, the Ombudsman for Children was consulted. Initially, the plan was to administer the vaccinations within schools during school hours. The Ombudsman criticised this because it would compromise the privacy of children. The plan was later changed due to a shortage of staff. While the vaccination process for younger children was given more time and consideration, and efforts were made to provide better information, these decisions were still primarily driven by societal interests such as public health and efficiency rather than prioritising the best interests of children.

This was evident in many of the decisions made during the pandemic that directly affected children (Ombudsman for Children in Iceland, 2022). In the opinion of the Ombudsman these examples highlight the need for children's rights and interests, as outlined in the Convention, to be explicitly addressed in legislation on epidemic diseases.

Supplementary report from the Ombudsman for Children to the CRC

In 2022, the Ombudsman handed in [a Supplementary report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#) regarding Iceland's fifth and sixth periodic reports. The Ombudsman emphasised that the Covid-19 pandemic had highlighted the need for authorities to take further steps in implementing the UNCRC by establishing processes and methods that ensure children receive relevant information, are included in decision-making processes, and that the impact of decisions on children is thoroughly assessed, and measures to mitigate negative effects are carried out.

Legal framework for epidemic diseases

In the supplementary report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Ombudsman stated that, the government failed to adequately consider children's rights in legislation related to epidemic diseases during the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2021, the Parliament approved a law allowing the forced quarantine of tourists from high-risk areas without assessing its impact on children or differentiating between adults and children. Despite objections from the Ombudsman, the draft law was accepted, without any changes to protect the rights of children. Even though the law never entered into force, it is important to address the way children's rights were ignored in [the preparatory work](#).

In November 2021, the Ministry of Health introduced a new draft law on epidemic diseases, claiming it was based on pandemic experiences and aligned with constitutional and human rights protections. However, the Ombudsman criticised the draft for failing to mention children's rights, despite the severe impact of restrictions on their well-being. A revised version in January 2022 included references to children's interests, but when [the final draft](#) was presented in March 2022, the Ministry rejected proposals to include references to ensuring child-friendly communication and mandatory Child Rights Impact Assessment.

The Ombudsman calls for CRIA to be systematically implemented in governance

The Ombudsman has been advocating for the regular and structured use of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) within governmental processes. On 23 April

2021, the Ombudsman sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Iceland highlighting concerns that numerous changes had been made to school and leisure activities without providing children with appropriate information. Moreover, decisions affecting children had been made without any consultation with them, their organisations, or the entities responsible for safeguarding their interests, such as the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman emphasised the importance of implementing a systematic CRIA, as there were indicators that the impact of decisions on children had not been assessed, even in cases of significantly burdensome decisions, such as the forced placement of children in quarantine facilities, without the possibility of outdoor activities or recreation.

The ombudsman further stressed that all states that are parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child are under a binding obligation to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures to implement the rights set out in the Convention. This includes a duty to ensure that all decisions affecting children are guided by the principle of the best interests of the child, that children are afforded genuine opportunities to participate in decisions that concern them, and that any proposed measures or changes likely to impact children are assessed in light of their rights, needs, and interests.

A central tool for fulfilling these obligations is the Child Rights Impact Assessment. Such assessments are critical to ensuring that children's views are meaningfully considered and that the potential consequences of decisions on children are identified and evaluated prior to implementation. This process helps to prevent foreseeable harm and enables authorities to adopt mitigating measures in cases where negative effects cannot be avoided.

Children's perspectives on Covid-19: A project by the Ombudsman for Children in Iceland

In the spring of 2020, the Ombudsman launched [a project collecting children's perspectives on Covid-19](#). Children were invited to share their experiences on growing up during the pandemic and its impact on their daily lives. [A second request followed in the winter of 2020](#), focusing on children's well-being and relationship with family and friends, amid high infection rates and strict measures, including a mask mandate for children. [In the spring of 2021, the Ombudsman sought children's perspectives for the third time](#), exploring their hopes for the post-pandemic future, including social life, school, leisure activities, and home conditions. [By spring 2022, a fourth request was made](#), emphasising children's experiences with preventive measures. The Ombudsman believes it was essential to gather information directly from children, since this provides valuable insight into their lives during Covid-19. Summaries of the children's responses were published on the Ombudsman for Children's website, and a report on the project was also published (Benediktsdóttir, 2022).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations

In its Concluding Observations on Iceland's combined fifth and sixth periodic reports, the committee addressed key concerns regarding children's participation in decision-making. The committee expressed concerns that children's views were not systematically considered in all matters affecting them. It recommended that Iceland strengthen measures to ensure that children's views are given due consideration in the family, schools, and communities, in accordance with their age and maturity. The committee expressed particular concern that younger children are not always given the opportunity to voice their opinions on matters that affect them. To strengthen child participation, the committee recommended amending the Youth Act to establish youth councils in all municipalities with clearly defined functions, responsibilities, and mandates. It also stressed the need to guarantee children's right to be heard, ensuring that all children can express their views and be actively involved in decisions affecting them.

To support this, the committee urged the government to introduce legislative amendments to ensure that children's perspectives are heard and taken into account in decisions affecting them. The committee further stressed the importance of enhancing meaningful participation, calling for stronger measures to empower all children, particularly those in disadvantaged situations, to participate in decisions that impact their lives. This includes involvement within families, communities, schools, and policymaking at both municipal and national levels. Additionally, the committee recommended that the outcomes of youth councils be systematically integrated into public decision-making. Recognising the role of professionals in supporting child participation, the committee recommended that the government ensure that all relevant professionals working with and for children, including teachers and youth care professionals, systematically receive appropriate training on the right of the child to be heard and have his or her opinion taken into account (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022). In the view of the Ombudsman, these recommendations emphasise the need for systematic and inclusive participation mechanisms to ensure that children's views are genuinely considered in all areas of decision-making (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022).

Crisis management of authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Prime Minister of Iceland appointed a committee on 2 September 2021 to assess the government's crisis management during the Covid-19 pandemic. [The committee's report, published in October 2022](#), revealed that the government had failed to consult children directly and implemented restrictions without assessing

their impact on young people or properly informing them. This oversight highlights a failure to safeguard children's rights in crisis response planning. The few consultations that did take place happened late in the process, at a point when it was no longer possible to influence the restrictions or measures in question. Efforts were made to inform children in a child-friendly manner, such as those by the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management. Despite these efforts, there remains a need to ensure children receive accessible and child-friendly information during crises.

Recommendations

Implement a systematic Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA)

According to [Article 3, Paragraph 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. To determine what this constitutes, it is essential to assess the impact of decisions and measures on children. Implementing a formal child rights impact assessment is a crucial step in enforcing the Convention and helping authorities to meet its requirements. Such assessments should always underpin public decision-making and be conducted before undertaking actions that affect children in any way. If the assessment reveals potential negative impacts on children, authorities are obligated to explore all possibilities to prevent such effects and implement mitigating measures when prevention is not possible. The Ombudsman has stressed the importance of implementing a mandatory CRIA within public administration. An important step was taken in Iceland on 20 November 2024 when [the Ministry of Education and Children published guidelines on conducting CRIA](#), which were developed in collaboration with the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. However, conducting a CRIA is not mandatory.

Ensure that all municipalities establish youth councils

Establishing youth councils within municipalities is essential for encouraging civic engagement among children and integrating their perspectives into local governance. The Ombudsman for Children emphasises the need for legally mandated youth councils with clearly defined functions, responsibilities, and mandates. In times of crisis, active youth councils are crucial as municipalities provide essential services to children, including education, social welfare, and child protection.

Have a comprehensive crisis management plan for children in place

When a crisis strikes, the government must have a comprehensive plan in place that specifically addresses children's needs. This includes their participation,

education, leisure activities, and access to healthcare services. Moreover, children should be consulted from the earliest stages of developing such a plan to ensure their voices are heard and their perspectives considered.

The absence of a crisis management plan for children became evident once again when the town of Grindavík had to be evacuated due to a volcanic eruption. This situation highlighted recurring challenges in safeguarding children's rights during crises. Similar to the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a notable lack of direct consultation with children regarding the measures implemented. Decisions affecting them were made without adequately assessing their specific needs or ensuring that information was communicated in a child-friendly manner.

Challenges where Nordic co-operation can contribute

Nordic countries can greatly benefit from sharing experiences on legislation, practices, and methods to uphold children's right to be heard during crises. By exchanging knowledge, best practices can be identified and well-founded recommendations for future crisis preparedness and response can be developed. Collaborative research and policy evaluations can strengthen child-focused crisis responses. Establishing shared guidelines and frameworks can ensure that children's perspectives are systematically considered across the region.

Shortlist on suggested actions for Nordic-level co-operation

1. **Implement a shared Nordic Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) Framework.**
Develop a standardized CRIA.
2. **Develop a Joint Nordic Crisis Preparedness Plan for Children**
Formulate a regional emergency plan that addresses children's needs in education, health, and well-being, co-developed with children.
3. **Launch a Nordic Research Collaboration on Children in Crises**
Coordinate cross-border research to collect data on the impact of crises on children and use findings to inform evidence-based policy and practice.
4. **Create a Nordic Observatory for Children's Rights**
Establish a regional observatory to monitor UNCRC implementation during crises, publish annual reports, and issue policy recommendations.
5. **Standardize digital inclusion measures across the region**
Agree on minimum standards for digital access and learning tools to ensure all children can participate in education during emergencies.
6. **Align epidemic and emergency legislation with child rights**
Harmonize laws to explicitly include children's rights, require child-friendly communication, and mandate consultation with child rights bodies.

7. **Align epidemic and emergency legislation with child rights**

Harmonise laws to explicitly include children's rights, require child-friendly communication, and mandate consultation with child rights bodies.

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Country report Norway

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The Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children is an independent state institution established to promote children's interests in society and monitor the development of children's living conditions. The Ombudsperson's role is to do its utmost to ensure that Norwegian law and administrative practices comply with the obligations Norway has undertaken by ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Norway ratified the UNCRC in 1991, and it has been incorporated into national law.

Norway was the first country in the world to establish a Children's Ombudsperson in 1981, in response to growing awareness in the 1970s that children are a vulnerable group in society, lacking voting rights and having limited opportunities to influence decisions relevant to them. The Ombudsperson is appointed for a six-year term by the King-In-Council. Initially, the term was four years with the possibility of reappointment, but since 2012, the term has been six years without extension.

The Ombudsperson's office has grown from a single person with a small secretariat to a team of approximately 20 employees dedicated to promoting children's rights in Norway. The current Ombudsperson, Mina Gerhardsen, was appointed in 2024 and will lead the office until spring 2030.

The latest Norwegian report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was submitted in 2024, and the hearing by the Committee was held in May 2025.

Introduction

In the Ombudsperson's experience, the Norwegian authorities primarily viewed the pandemic as a public health crisis. The number of people infected and the lack of capacity in hospital emergency departments were factors that influenced many of the decisions made. However, the consequences of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown were far-reaching. Measures to control the infection restricted freedom of movement and shut down services and programmes. The lockdown was a significant intrusion into the lives of children and young people. Throughout the pandemic, we believed that the consequences for children and young people were not given sufficient consideration.

The evidence shows that the impact on children, young people, and their families of the pandemic and the measures taken to combat it were very different (Nøkleby et al., 2023). Those who were already vulnerable were particularly affected by the pandemic itself, the infection control measures, and the lack of information (Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet, 2020). In the Ombudsperson's view, the consequences for children and young people were not given sufficient consideration, nor was the available knowledge handled expediently.

Three reports have evaluated the efforts of the authorities during the pandemic. They conclude that the goal of protecting children and young people was not achieved. The reports highlight, among other things, that the experiences of children and young people were not taken into account. This has been a concern for the ombudsperson and organisations working with children and young people throughout the pandemic. [Our responses to these reports](#) summarise the Ombudsperson's views on the management of the pandemic. We also highlight our experiences in our submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (The Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children, 2023).

Learning point 1 - Strengthening systems for child participation and assessments of the best interest of the child

The Ombudsperson considers that a more profound knowledge and understanding of the consequences for children and young people would have resulted in different decisions during the pandemic. It is imperative that the authorities undertake rigorous impact assessments for children as a means of ensuring their well-being. It is the government's obligation to guarantee that the best interests of the child are a fundamental consideration in all decisions, in accordance with the conditions set out in Section 104 of the Norwegian Constitution and Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The obligation to listen to the voices of children is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which, as stipulated in the Human Rights Act, holds supremacy over other Norwegian legislative instruments.

The Ombudsperson emphasises that integrating assessments of both the consequences for children and the best interests of the child into investigative processes can significantly enhance crisis management. By embedding this child-centred methodology into standard procedures, authorities will be better equipped to protect and support children and young people during times of crisis. This approach represents a crucial step toward ensuring that their rights, safety, and well-being are prioritised at every stage of decision-making.

The government's investigation tools now include the best interests of the child and the right of children to be heard, which is a positive development. The guidelines to The Instructions for Official Studies and Reports are a vital tool for the preparation of central government measure, and in 2024 specifications on the best interests of the child and children's right to be heard were included in the document. This establishes a solid foundation for enhancing the government's official Studies, ensuring that the perspectives of children and young people are given due consideration and respect.

[The Norwegian Parliament has also instructed the Government to go through all preparedness related legislation in Norway](#) and propose rules to ensure that the best interest of the Child is a primary consideration and to the maximal extend possible ensure a 'normal' life for children in all crisis response in the future. This is in line with the recommendations from the Norwegian Ombudsperson after the Pandemic and will hopefully contribute to better crisis responses in the future.

However, these changes alone are not sufficient. They must be accompanied by concrete implementation measures. Properly assessing the best interests of the child and effectively gathering the views of children and young people require both specialised expertise and targeted training.

To support this, the Ombudsperson has developed [a comprehensive e-learning programme](#). This resource offers practical guidance on how to assess the best interests of the child and facilitate meaningful child participation. The guidance is designed to be applicable at both the individual and systemic levels. These courses have been designed to be beneficial for all individuals working with and for children.

Recommendation: The state should provide clear guidance and take proactive measures to strengthen expertise in child participation and in conducting assessments of the best interests of the child.

To embed these principles into everyday practice, ministries and directorates (government agencies) must explicitly include requirements for such assessments and for child participation in government documents, assignment letters, and mandates.

The government should explore concrete measures to ensure that national governments and municipalities consistently fulfil their obligations to consider the best interests of the child and to actively engage with children in their

decision-making processes. A joint Nordic initiative to examine how these responsibilities are implemented across countries could provide valuable insights and promote best practices.

Learning point 2 - Use existing structures to gather experience from children and young people

Norway has well-established structures for the participation of children and young people. These structures were underutilised during the pandemic. Across the country, there is a wide range of civil society youth organisations, including scouting, marching bands, sports clubs, groups representing children in care, political youth parties, environmental advocates, and organisations for children and young people with disabilities.

[The Norwegian Children and Youth Council \(LNU\)](#) is an umbrella organisation representing over 100 member organisations. It has extensive experience in facilitating participatory processes with children and young people. The Ministry of Children and Families regularly engages the council and its member organisations as expert partners. The Ministry also holds regular dialogue meetings with key youth-focused umbrella organisations such as [Young Disabled \(UngFunk\)](#) and [Ungdom og Fritid](#) (organisation for youth clubs and young people outside formal organisations). These umbrella bodies and their individual organisations all provide invaluable perspectives, especially from marginalised and underrepresented youth.

Despite these strong partnerships, these umbrella bodies and their member organisations were not systematically consulted during the pandemic. This represents a missed opportunity to incorporate the voices of children and young people into crisis response and decision-making.

All Norwegian municipalities must have a youth council (Kommunal- og distriktsdepartementet, 2019), and every school must have a student council. However, during the pandemic, the activities of these councils were suspended. This was a missed opportunity to engage children and young people at a time when their perspectives were especially needed. Rather than pausing their work, municipalities and schools should have activated these councils to collect and reflect the experiences and views of young people during the crisis. This could have been achieved through digital consultations and virtual platforms, even under lockdown conditions.

Unfortunately, there has been no clear follow-up or strategic planning regarding the mobilisation of these existing participatory structures in future crises. While there is considerable variation in how municipalities support and utilise their youth councils, there are also strong examples of good practice that could serve as models for others.

Authorities have conducted surveys on youth participation at both the municipal

and system levels, including the functioning of youth councils (Bygdås & Hagen, 2022; Rambøll Management Consulting AS, 2024). While these efforts provide a valuable foundation, there is still significant potential to further develop and strengthen participatory methods with children and young people. Meaningful, inclusive, and resilient participation mechanisms must be prioritised in moving forward.

Recommendation: To ensure that the views of children and young people are considered in future crises, the authorities should strengthen youth and student councils and establish clear routines for activating them during emergencies. Cooperation with youth umbrella organisations should be formalised.

These structures must remain operational during lockdown through digital participation. They must be used to gather young people's experiences and views and to provide them with relevant, age-appropriate information. Best practice from municipalities should be shared to improve participation nationwide.

Learning point 3 - Incorporating knowledge about and from children into preparedness work

The Norwegian authorities set up a [cross-sectoral coordination group](#) made up of government agencies from all the relevant sectors at the start of the pandemic. The group's mandate was clear: to gather and consolidate knowledge about the situation of children, particularly those in vulnerable situations (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2022)

The coordination group worked closely with the county governors and held productive discussions with various relevant stakeholders to gather in-depth knowledge about the situation of children. During the pandemic, the group submitted 15 reports to the government, providing timely insights and recommendations. The group made it clear that keeping essential services for children and young people open was of the utmost importance, stressing that schools were especially vital in ensuring the well-being of children during crises.

The establishment of the coordination group was an essential measure. Unfortunately, the evaluations show that the knowledge was not sufficiently disseminated to where decisions were made. As a result, the reports were not given sufficient weight. This weakened efforts to protect children and young people.

General knowledge about what matters for children and young people –drawn from research, professional experience, and the voices of children themselves – was not adequately acknowledged during the pandemic. The Ombudsperson's view is that critical assessments and decisions are made in environments dominated by health and emergency preparedness perspectives.

[The Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies \(NKVTS\)](#) has also highlighted that responsibility for psychosocial preparedness and follow-up is not

yet clear, and that psychosocial support must be integrated into central preparedness planning (Bækkelund & Stene, 2025).

Recommendation: It is essential that knowledge about children and young people, especially those in vulnerable situations, is systematically integrated into emergency preparedness and response. It is essential that professionals with expertise in child development, child welfare, and psychosocial support be involved in both emergency planning and response.

Preparedness procedures must draw on research, professional insight, and the lived experiences of children and young people to inform decision-making during crises.

Cross-border co-operation is essential in the Nordic region, where many children have close family living or working across borders. Coordinated crisis responses are crucial to protect their rights and family life. A structured Nordic dialogue is needed to integrate child-focused knowledge into crisis planning and strengthen regional preparedness.

Learning point 4 - Ensuring high-level co-operation for children in vulnerable situations

The Norwegian government has established a core group structure. This will strengthen inter-sectoral co-operation among ministries and government agencies. The Ministerial Core Operational Group for Children in Vulnerable Situations (KUBU) is central to this. It consists of the top administrative heads of eight ministries. KUBU is the key to successful interagency collaboration. [It brings together the directors of 13 relevant government bodies, including key government agencies.](#) Mandates are issued jointly through the Directors' Meeting or the Core Group of Ministries. This ensures coordinated leadership and accountability.

KUBU directly addresses cross-sectoral challenges, including juvenile justice and effective preventive work. The objective is clear: to create a more unified and responsive system for children and young people in vulnerable situations. The group is supported by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir), which plays a key role in facilitating this collaboration.

The Ombudsperson for Children believes that this model will improve how the state designs and implements measures for children and youth. There is significant potential to involve children and young people more directly in this work. The government must support their participation systematically. It is vital that the establishment of a National Resource Centre for Child Participation is implemented (see Learning Point 6) to ensure that young voices are meaningfully included in shaping the policies that affect them.

Recommendation: The Norwegian government needs to maintain and strengthen the Core Group structure and ensure its activation in future crises. The group's work must include the systematic participation of children and young people

Learning point 5 - Use existing knowledge and digital tools to boost child participation

The pandemic has shown beyond doubt that we must make child and youth participation in crisis response a top priority. During the pandemic there were several initiatives to put children's participation on the agenda. These included formal communications, such as [letters from the Norwegian National Human Rights Institution](#), and a [multi-agency webinar](#) where five key recommendations on participation were endorsed and presented to the government. There is clear evidence that children and young people can be meaningfully involved even under restrictive conditions. The Norwegian Red Cross (Røde Kors, 2021) and the Children's Ombudsperson have demonstrated successful models of participation during the pandemic, proving that meaningful engagement is both possible and impactful even in times of crisis (Barneombudets ekspertgruppe om koronapandemien, 2021).

However, the experiences and insights shared by children and young people were not fully utilised, and much of the existing knowledge remains fragmented or inaccessible. The lack of a centralised register or knowledge base on child participation hinders our ability to learn from past efforts and apply them in future crises.

The government must take responsibility and make sure it systematically collects, preserves, and makes accessible knowledge from and about children and young people. This is critical not only for future emergency preparedness but also for everyday policymaking. The establishment of a National Resource Centre for Child Participation (see Learning Point 6) is a key step toward achieving this goal.

The Ombudsperson has summarised our experiences of digital participation (Barneombudet, 2021). It can have good results, but there are also disadvantages. We strongly believe that methods for digital participation need to be developed further.

Recommendation: The Norwegian government should ensure that knowledge from and about children and young people is systematically collected, preserved, and made accessible for both crisis response and everyday policymaking. It must also invest in the further development of digital participation methods, building on lessons learned during the pandemic. A joint Nordic initiative is key to exchanging experiences and co-developing innovative digital tools. This will strengthen regional capacity and ensure that child participation remains resilient and inclusive even in times of crisis.

Learning point 6 - A national resource centre for child participation

Over a significant period, civil society has called on the Norwegian authorities to strengthen the structures that support children's participation at the system level. The pandemic made it clear that we urgently needed clear guidance, qualified methodologies, and a central register of existing knowledge. This gap must be addressed with urgency and commitment.

Civil society organisations and monitoring bodies agree that the Norwegian government should improve how it fulfils children's right to participate in decision-making. A national centre for child and youth participation, established under government authority, is a necessary step forward. A centre like this must serve as a hub for collecting and organising knowledge, offering expert guidance and advice, and maintaining a comprehensive and accessible knowledge base. The centre must be legitimate, visible, thematically broad, and have sufficient capacity to support both national and local efforts if it is to be effective.

The Ombudsperson has recommended that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child urge Norway to establish a centre dedicated to child and youth participation, as well as national strategies and action plans to embed participation at all levels of government. Each ministry must develop its own structures for engaging children and young people. The UN Committee also addressed this in the concluding observation to Norway (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2025).

While the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) has developed [valuable guidelines for system-level participation](#), these resources remain underutilised and underappreciated.

To ensure that participation becomes a consistent and meaningful part of public governance, there needs to be greater effort to promote, disseminate, and implement these tools across sectors.

Recommendation: The government should establish a national resource centre for child participation. This centre must serve as a central hub for collecting data, building expertise, and providing guidance on participation at both national and local levels. Strengthening capacity in this area is essential not just to embed participation more deeply in public governance, but also to ensure more effective responses in future crises. This is the primary recommendation for advancing child participation in Norway.

In addition, the government should draw inspiration from the Irish model, which includes a dedicated national strategy on child participation and a separate body focused on supporting participation across government.

To ensure a lasting impact, a Nordic institution under the Nordic Council of Ministers could be given the specific responsibility of coordinating these efforts

across the region, both in terms of participation and regarding safeguarding all children's rights. This would help to unify the Nordic governments' fragmented governance structures where the well-being of children is often divided among the ministries of health, education, family, and social affairs.

Learning point 7 - Don't think that everything is the same.

Follow-up

The Ombudsperson has repeatedly called for a clear plan outlining how the government intends to support children and young people in the aftermath of the pandemic. To date, these calls have received little response.

There is a growing sense that Norway has moved on from the pandemic, with little public or political recognition that its effects may still be shaping the lives of children and young people. In our experience, the pandemic is no longer considered a relevant factor when the authorities assess challenges, develop policies, or implement measures affecting this group.

Yet serious concerns were raised during the pandemic: reduced learning outcomes; loss of daily structure; diminished services for children with disabilities; increased risks of violence, abuse, and neglect; limited access to leisure activities; and a rise in serious mental health issues. The pandemic also heightened the risk of social exclusion among young people.

Despite this, current policies and measures addressing youth crime, child welfare, mental health, school dropout, and increased use of force against children and young people seem to be disconnected from the long-term impact of the pandemic. These issues are being treated in isolation without acknowledging the role the pandemic may have played in exacerbating them.

Meaningful follow-up requires recognition that the consequences of the pandemic did not end when restrictions were lifted. The government must take responsibility for assessing these long-term effects and ensure that recovery efforts are informed by the lived experiences of children and young people.

Recommendation: The government must initiate a comprehensive review focusing on the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. This review should identify the current needs of children and the lessons necessary to prepare for future crises. The voices of children and young people must be central to this process. All analyses and policy responses must recognise that children have experienced two years of sustained disruption, which may continue to impact their well-being, development, and support requirements.

Summary of recommendations

The pandemic enhanced and exposed critical weaknesses in how Norway protects and involves children and young people during emergencies. Based on these lessons, the Ombudsperson for Children recommends the following actions to uphold children's rights in everyday governance and future crises:

1. Centre all decision-making on children's rights

Ensure that all government decisions affecting children include assessments of their best interests and provide meaningful opportunities for children to be heard, in line with national and international legal obligations.

2. Activate youth participation structures in emergencies

Maintain and utilise youth and student councils, as well as youth organisations, during crises. Support these structures to enable them to gather input and communicate with children and young people, including through digital platforms.

3. Integrate child-focused expertise in emergency preparedness

Involve professionals specialising in child welfare, development, and mental health in crisis planning and response. Children's lived experiences must inform preparedness strategies and decision-making processes.

4. Strengthen cross-government coordination for vulnerable children

Maintain and enhance high-level coordination between ministries and agencies to address the needs of vulnerable children. Ensure that children and young people are actively involved in shaping the policies that affect them.

5. Systematise and share knowledge on child participation

Collect, preserve, and make accessible knowledge and experiences from and about children. Invest in developing digital participation tools and promote Nordic cooperation to innovate and share best practices.

6. Establish a national centre for child participation

Create a dedicated centre to spearhead efforts on child and youth participation, provide expert guidance, and support implementation across sectors. A Nordic coordination body could help to align efforts across countries and safeguard children's rights regionally.

7. Conduct a national review of the pandemic's impact on children

Conduct a comprehensive review to assess the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. Their voices must be central to this process, and the findings should inform current support measures and future crisis planning.

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Country report Sweden

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The Swedish Ombudsman for Children is an independent government agency responsible for promoting and protecting the rights and interests of children in Sweden, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Sweden ratified the UNCRC in 1990, and in 2020 the Convention was incorporated into Swedish national legislation.

The Ombudsman's primary responsibility is to ensure that children's rights are upheld in Swedish legislation and practice, and to advocate for improvements where necessary. The office also raises awareness of children's rights and advises the government on policies affecting children's welfare, including education, healthcare, child welfare, and social services.

The Children's Ombudsman was established in Sweden in 1993. The current Ombudsman, Juno Blom, was appointed in February 2024. She has extensive experience in children's rights and has previously worked on issues related to honour-based violence and oppression.

The Ombudsman is appointed for a term of six years, with the possibility of reappointment. The Ombudsman's office ensures that children's voices are heard and that they are involved in decisions affecting their lives, according to their age and maturity.

Sweden submitted its latest periodic report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023.

Introduction

The following report introduces the subject of children's rights and participation, as set out in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Grounded in empirical evidence, the report draws on children's first-hand accounts of the challenges and opportunities they experienced during the pandemic. It highlights children's own views on their opportunities for participation during the pandemic and provides examples of how the Swedish public sector worked to strengthen children's right to participation. Finally, we offer suggestions on how to strengthen the right to participation in future crises.

Children in Sweden during the pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Swedish government activated a series of measures to limit the spread of the virus. Decisions were made continuously at national, regional, and local levels. These included restrictions on social contact, the introduction of distance learning for many students, and the closure of facilities, activities, and services that were important to children both in municipalities and in civil society organisations.

In contrast to the practices observed in numerous other countries, which entailed the complete closure of educational institutions, Sweden endeavoured to maintain schools open by implementing adapted infection control measures. During periods of high transmission, upper secondary students were fully or partially moved to remote learning. However, primary and lower secondary schools remained operational, providing in-person education for children who exhibited no symptoms of illness. Sweden's strategy was to avoid school closures and limit the use of distance learning since such measures were considered harmful to the health and well-being of children and adolescents (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2023).

Children's own experiences of the pandemic

Several reports have documented children's own experiences of the pandemic. The report by Barnombudsmannen (2021, 2022), for example, states that children had a good understanding of the restrictions and ways to reduce infection, but their concerns were often overlooked by adults. For instance, children told UNICEF Sweden (2020) that they were worried about their families and that they had less time for leisure activities, while demonstrating responsibility and an understanding of the restrictions. Reports from the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2022, 2024) and Sveriges Elevkårer (Swedish student bodies) (2021, 2022) highlight issues such as loneliness, difficulties with schoolwork, and stress during distance learning. It can be concluded from the reports that, although Sweden did not shut down society in the same way as many other countries and kept primary and secondary schools

open, the pandemic and the restrictions still affected children in many ways.

While the children's stories in the reports may initially seem minor, the pandemic changed their everyday lives, affecting their safety, empowerment, and sense of the future. Many children took responsibility for preventing the spread of the virus and obeyed the restrictions; however, they also witnessed adults breaking them, which created mistrust. Children adjusted their behaviour, met fewer friends, and worried about their family's health and finances. Extracurricular activities disappeared, and schoolwork became more challenging as motivation waned. Everyday life changed.

– Jag spelar handboll. Det är en mycket fysisk sport så alla matcher är inställda och cuper. Våra träningar är lite annorlunda nu.

Pojke, årskurs 6 (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

– I play handball. It's a very physical sport, so all our matches have been cancelled, and our cups have been postponed. Our training sessions are a bit different now. Boy, grade 6 (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

– Jag gick på trummor. Nu har vi trummor på distans, vilket är ganska komplicerat eftersom jag inte har något trumset.

Flicka, årskurs 9 (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

– I used to play the drums. Now, with remote drumming, it's quite complicated because I don't have a drum kit.

Girl, grade 9 (UNICEF Sverige, 2020)

The pandemic made many children realise how important social relationships and security are. Many said that they had felt lonely and missed their family and friends.

– Jag känner mig ensam och saknar mina vänner.

Tonåring (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

– I feel lonely, and I miss my friends.

Teenager, (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

Children were also concerned for their parents and other relatives. They were concerned about them falling ill and losing their jobs.

– Det är inte lätt, jag fattar det, men alltså, vad ska jag göra liksom? Det är inte som att jag har ett eget rum och kan hålla avstånd och inte träffa folk hemma. Mormor är i sån här riskgrupp, och några andra i familjen också, jag har typ ångest, alltså på riktigt att jag ska döda dom för det är så mycket smitta i skolan. Men sen, alltså, det är ett helt år. Jag har inte varit seriös med det här hela tiden, det har varit lite mer som att ibland orkar jag vara seriös men, alltså, eh, nu skäms jag lite, men inte hela tiden.

Pojke i årskurs 9 (Barnombudsmannen, 2022).

– It's not easy, I get it, but what am I supposed to do? It's not like I have my own

room where I can keep my distance and avoid seeing anyone at home. My grandmother and some other members of my family are in a high-risk group. I'm really anxious that I'm going to kill them because there's so much infection at school. But then, it's a whole year. I haven't been taking this seriously the whole time; sometimes I can handle being serious, but, eh I'm a bit ashamed now, but not all the time.

Boy, grade 9 (Barnombudsmannen, 2022).

Children had mixed feelings about their parents working from home. Some thought it was nice to spend more time together, while others missed having time alone and enjoying some peace and quiet.

– Lite jobbigt, jag har mindre fritid nu för att de alltid säger till mig att göra något vettigt, t.ex. läxor.

Flicka, årskurs 6 (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

– It's a bit difficult. I have less leisure time now because they always tell me to do something useful, like homework.

Girl, grade 6 (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

– Det är väldigt jobbigt hemma. Det har påverkat oss väldigt mycket. Det är mer bråk för flera mår dåligt, det är många saker, inte bara det med riskgrupp utan också att pappa inte kan resa i jobbet och då är han hemma. Alla är här hela tiden, och jag är livrädd att någon ska bli smittad, men pappa verkar typ inte rädd alls, eller ja, det är han väl men inte som jag.

Flicka, 11 år, med anhörig i riskgrupp (Barnombudsmannen, 2022).

– It's really tough at home. It's had a big impact on us. There are more arguments because several of us are feeling down, there are lots of things to consider, not just the risk group thing, but also that Dad can't travel for work and is therefore at home. Everyone's here pretty much all the time, and I'm worried that someone might get infected, but Dad doesn't seem worried at all, or yes, I guess he is, but not like me.

Girl, 11, with a relative in a risk group (Barnombudsmannen, 2022).

The opportunities for children in the care of the state to seek assistance and support from adults varied considerably. Some children who were placed in state care felt it was easier to communicate with their designated social worker online. Other children found digital communication with their social worker to be impersonal and preferred face-to-face meetings.

– Det blir bara möten via Teams med socialtjänsten. Det är jätteviktiga möten för mig, men det blir inte lika seriöst när man har det via Teams.

Flicka, 16 år (Barnombudsmannen, 2022).

– All meetings with social services are now held on Teams. These meetings are very important to me, but they don't feel as serious when they're held on Teams.

Girl, 16 (Barnombudsmannen, 2022).

Children's opportunities for participation during the pandemic

Several reports, whether on distance learning, lack of support for pupils with disabilities, or mental health issues, show that in many cases the child's right to be heard was not realised during the pandemic (Barnombudsmannen, 2021; UNICEF Sverige, 2020; Sveriges Elevkårer 2021, 2022; Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022, 2024). Several legislative proposals submitted to the Ombudsman for Children during the pandemic also lacked a child rights perspective, and children were not involved in the inquiry work. See, for example, [Promemoria om särskilda begränsningar för att förhindra spridning av sjukdomen Covid-19 \(by Barnombudsmannen\)](#); [Utkast till lagrådsremiss: Statlig ersättning för personskada orsakad av vaccin mot sjukdomen Covid-19 \(by Barnombudsmannen\)](#); and [Promemorian Ändringar i det tillfälliga förbudet mot att hålla allmänna sammankomster och offentliga tillställningar \(by Barnombudsmannen\)](#).

At the same time, many children wanted to contribute to society and be involved in the measures implemented to stop the infection. However, the formal opportunities for children and young people to be heard in local decision-making processes, for example, were limited (Barnombudsmannen, 2021, 2022). Children with whom the Ombudsman for Children spoke during the pandemic reported shortcomings in information, processes, feedback, and influence:

– Jag kan nästan tycka att ibland känns det som att en vuxen röst kan nästan vara hundra små barnröster. Ja, för att man lyssnar mer på de vuxna.
(Barnombudsmannen, 2022).

– I almost think that sometimes it feels like one adult voice can almost be a hundred little child voices. Yes, because you listen more to the adults.
(Barnombudsmannen, 2022).

Children testified that they had no real opportunity to influence how decisions about distance learning or other restrictions were implemented in their school (Barnombudsmannen, 2021; Sveriges Elevkårer, 2020, 2021). Many children felt that they were neither consulted nor given the opportunity to express their views before decisions were made, even though the changes had a direct impact on their education and everyday life. This led to feelings of powerlessness and exclusion. In addition, children expressed frustration that the policies were sometimes perceived as inconsistent. They felt that some rules and restrictions were strictly enforced, while others were interpreted arbitrarily or not enforced at all. For example, the school might be very strict about rules on mobile phones or other issues of order, while infection control measures such as distancing or restrictions on large gatherings were not always taken seriously. This kind of inconsistency created a sense of unfairness and contributed to children questioning both school priorities and adult decisions:

– De [skolan] är ju mer seriösa när det gäller mobiler än när det gäller corona. Alltså

man kan vara i en stor hög och snacka och de säger ingenting, men när det kommer till våra telefoner blir det kaos. (Barnombudsmannen, 2021).

– They [the school] are more serious when it comes to mobile phones than when it comes to corona. So you can be in a big pile and talk and they don't say anything, but when it comes to our phones, it's chaos. (Barnombudsmannen, 2021).

– att om det säger att det ska vara en stol emellan två personer så följer vi elever, men igår såg jag fem vuxna sitta ihopklistrade. (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

– if it says that there should be a chair between two people, we students follow it, but yesterday I saw five adults sitting glued together. (UNICEF Sverige, 2020).

Children also reported that they often did not receive important information during the pandemic, that information came too late, or was not tailored to their needs. This made it difficult for them to understand and influence decisions that affected their lives (Barnombudsmannen, 2021). A key part of children's right to participation is the right to information. To form opinions and participate in decisions that affect them, children need to understand what is happening and what options are available. Without relevant and tailored information, children's influence risks being limited and their right to be heard weakened.

Proposals of the Ombudsman for Children to ensure children's right to participation in crises

Drawing on the experience of the pandemic, the Ombudsman for Children notes that children need better opportunities to participate and access information, and that vulnerable groups must be given particular attention in future. For children's rights to be realised in future crises, long-term, sustainable structures for children's participation are required. Adults cannot simply assume that they know what is best for children; we must actively listen to children, involve them in decision-making, and ensure they have a say in issues affecting their lives. To better protect children in future crises, it is crucial that they have access not only to appropriate information, but also real opportunities to influence decisions.

Decision-makers must always prioritise children's best interests and ensure their right to participate, even in times of crisis. This could involve setting up children's councils, creating digital platforms for dialogue, or establishing other forums where children's diverse experiences and views are considered. Strengthening children's participation is not just a symbolic measure. It is necessary to build a more resilient society in which children's rights are never an afterthought.

The Ombudsman for Children proposes the following measures to strengthen future crisis preparedness based on the rights and needs of children:

Mandate Child Rights Impact Assessments

Require that all legislative and policy proposals related to crisis preparedness include a formal child rights impact assessment.

Child participation mechanisms

Establish permanent child and youth councils at all levels with a formal advisory role in crisis-related decision-making.

Develop inclusive digital participation tools

Create secure, accessible, and child-friendly digital platforms for participation, ensuring inclusion of children of different ages, with disabilities, or limited digital access.

Evaluate participation practices

Introduce systems for monitoring and evaluating child participation during and after crises, including feedback mechanisms where children can reflect on their experiences.

Ensure expert-reviewed child communication

Require that all crisis-related information for children is reviewed by child development experts and tested with children before dissemination.

Create cross-sectoral crisis response teams

Form interdisciplinary crisis response groups that include child representatives from vulnerable groups and professionals from, for example, education, health, and social services. They should identify and provide additional support to groups of children who are particularly vulnerable in times of crisis, such as those in economically or socially disadvantaged situations, such as children who live with domestic violence or those with disabilities.

Strengthen Nordic cooperation on child participation

Promote structured Nordic collaboration to exchange good practices, tools, and strategies for child participation in crisis preparedness. This could include joint development of child-friendly communication materials, shared frameworks for child rights impact assessments, and a regional platform for involving children – especially those in vulnerable situations – in decision-making processes. Such cooperation can enhance resilience and ensure that children's rights are upheld consistently across the Nordic region.

Good examples from Sweden

Children who have shared their experiences of the pandemic emphasise the importance of accurate and easily understandable information. This is an area

where the Nordic countries can learn from each other.

One Swedish initiative that responds to children's need for information is [the Lilla Krisinfo-website](#), launched by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) in 2023. The platform is part of [the website krisinformation.se](#) and contains tailored information on crises and current events. The website presents information in a way that is easily accessible and adapted to children's needs and questions. Lilla Krisinfo has been used to inform children about crises and societal challenges such as extreme weather conditions, forest fires, and other events that can affect their everyday lives.

Both the government and the Public Health Agency of Sweden carried out communication activities aimed at children during the pandemic. The Swedish Public Health Agency developed a national information campaign on Covid-19 aimed at children, adolescents, and young adults in all forms of school and education in Sweden. The aim was to remind everyone in society of the need to work together to reduce the spread of infection.^[1] Prime Minister also held a press conference for children and young people about the pandemic.

Sweden has an established a children's news programme, *Lilla Aktuellt*, which has been broadcast by Sveriges Television (SVT) since 1993 and is aimed at children aged 9–12. The programme serves as an adapted news channel, providing children with information in an understandable way. Many schools in Sweden regularly show *Lilla Aktuellt* during lessons, especially in subjects such as social studies and Swedish. In addition to the daily news programme, *Lilla Aktuellt skola*, a longer version with more in-depth features, is also broadcast, especially for classroom use. *Lilla Aktuellt* is an important platform for giving children in Sweden access to reliable and tailored information.

The Children's Ombudsman believes that Nordic co-operation could strengthen each country's ability to systematically integrate the perspectives of children and young people into legislation, policymaking, and practice. A common issue for all Nordic countries is how to improve opportunities for children to participate in the legislative process. The Swedish government has commissioned the Swedish National Financial Management Authority (ESV) to develop a framework to guide those carrying out impact assessments in government reports. This has resulted in an information page, [Beakta olika relevanta perspektiv i konsekvensutredningen, ESV Forum](#), where knowledge is shared about children's participation in government inquiries and the Swedish Government Official Reports.

Creating a forum for the exchange of good examples and practices could facilitate benchmarking and create synergies to advance children's rights politically. The Children's Ombudsman would like to highlight the importance of sharing examples of how vulnerable groups of children, such as those with disabilities or those exposed to violence, can be involved in decision-making processes.

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Country report Åland

Author: Johanna Fogelström-Duns

The Children's Ombudsman in Åland is part of the Åland Ombudsman Authority, an independent institution with several mandates. The Children's Ombudsman's role is to promote the rights and interests of children in the Åland Islands by ensuring that Åland's laws and administrative practices comply with the obligations set forth by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was ratified by Finland and the Åland parliament in 1991.

Åland has had a form of Children's Ombudsman since the mid-1990s, but it was not until 2014 that it was made official and regulated in law. The Ombudsman's duties include advising local authorities, monitoring children's living conditions, and advocating for their best interests. The Ombudsman's mandate further includes ensuring that children's voices are heard and that policies reflect their rights and needs.

The office is responsible for reviewing policies affecting children in Åland, providing recommendations, and raising awareness about children's rights.

The most recent Finnish report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was submitted in 2019; this was the first time the report included separate reporting on issues from Åland. The Children's Ombudsman participated with Save the Children Åland for the first time in the Committee's hearing of civil society in September 2022.

Background

Åland is the smallest autonomous region in the Nordic countries. It comprises Swedish-speaking islands located between Finland and Sweden. In December 2024, it had a population of 30,654. Of these, 5,888 (19.2%) were children. The Åland Autonomy Act grants Åland certain legislative powers impacting the lives and rights of children, including those relating to healthcare, social welfare and child protection, education, culture and leisure activities, and youth work. Some of these areas are organised at a regional level under the responsibility of the Åland government, such as healthcare and secondary education, while others function at a regional or municipal level under municipal responsibility.

As a result of Covid-19, the Emergency Powers Act entered into force in Finland in March 2020. Legislation on communicable diseases requires Finnish competency, but the Emergency Powers Act meant that areas that usually fall within the Åland autonomy also became subject to state authority. For two months, schools were closed and organised children's activities were cancelled.

During this period, the Åland economy was rapidly hit as businesses had to close. Recommendations on quarantine and required testing put constraints on the free movement of people both within Åland and Finland and across the border to Sweden. In April 2020, unemployment in Åland rose to 12.7%, compared to 3.4% in April 2019. Åland society was put under considerable pressure. Children and adults already in a vulnerable situation before the pandemic were at risk of being the hardest hit regarding health and socioeconomic matters (Ålands landskapsregering, 2022). Although the number of cases of Covid-19 in the first few months was rather low, many people were experiencing stress, frustrations, and loneliness due to the pandemic and the restrictions imposed. There were fears of increased gender-based violence such as had been seen in other countries, and the under-reporting to the child protection services during spring 2020 raised concerns as the normal safety nets to protect children were out of play. Input from social services and education professionals to the Ombudsman state[AR1] that the restrictions on contact and meetings made it more difficult to work with a multi-sectoral approach (involving education, social welfare, healthcare, etc.) as there was a perceived lack of common guidelines on how to cooperate or proceed considering contamination risks, etc.

As the pandemic continued, the relatively small Åland administration was under considerable strain with rapid changes and ongoing analyses on legislative issues, directives, modifications, updates, and decisions. There was a need to continuously communicate with different stakeholders and the public. Within the remits of its decision-making powers and epidemiological considerations, the Åland government tried not to restrict or close education and leisure activities for children and young people more than necessary. Evaluations were conducted at an early stage to guide

policy and preparedness, for instance in the education sector (Eriksson & Lindberg, 2021). The evaluations did not elicit answers directly from children. However, views from children and youth were gathered through other channels as outlined below (Ålands landskapsregering, 2022).

Safeguarding children's rights during and after the pandemic

Key challenges and lessons learned

The relatively smooth transition from on-site to online learning was possible for many schools as they had already introduced a level of digitalisation in teaching and made digital devices for the pupils available. This helped reduce potential negative effects on children caused by possible variation in digital preparedness between households. However, ensuring equity among children across Åland was a challenge during the pandemic. Being at home meant that children whose parents could work from home had an advantage if their parents were able to assist with schoolwork and lunches, etc., compared to children whose parents had to go their workplace.

Another challenge was safeguarding the rights of children in a vulnerable position, as contacts with adults outside the home were fewer due to restrictions. A meeting between the Ombudsman and school and daycare leaders of the Northern Åland Education District in January 2025 showed that some school professionals experienced that it was hard to get support from professionals in other sectors

The debate on the provision of school lunches during school closures was lively in Åland, as the municipalities had varying approaches. For some children and families, the food provided was extremely important, and it was unfortunate that a polarising discussion ensued in a perceived lack of clear guidelines to the schools and municipalities.

Some of the challenges were addressed through changes to the Åland Education Act, which took effect on 1 January 2021. The changes included more clearly regulating matters such as teaching during distance schooling, provision of school lunches, and how to ensure multi-sectoral support to children during exceptional circumstances.

Overall, the pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital tools, which generally promoted participation and increased the outreach of activities and information throughout the Åland islands in the aftermath of the pandemic. Input to the Ombudsman from education professionals in Archipelago School in February 2025 shows it also facilitated closer cooperation among the schools in the archipelago municipalities and has expanded their support network.

A somewhat unexpected outcome reported by Save the Children Åland in January

2025 is that as adults became better at using digital tools. Their understanding of children's digital world also increased. Reaching out to children and young people on the platforms they frequent could boost information and in turn participation.

At the height of the crisis, the government gave daily press information with updates on the situation. The information was made available live through local radio and TV, as well as the government's YouTube channel. Information was mainly given in Swedish, but some efforts were made to provide information in other languages. The speed of updates was a challenge.

There was some information shared through the media, the websites of authorities and organisations, and social media on how to talk to children about the pandemic. Information about phone and chat support services for children and young people was also shared. However, not much information was aimed directly at children and youth from the authorities.

At a national level in Finland, some efforts were made to communicate directly with children. For Åland, information in Swedish at the national level is of utmost importance, especially in times of crisis. Being on the border, Åland's population gets a lot of information from Sweden. However, the national strategies dealing with the pandemic in the two countries were very different. Therefore, a lack of information in Swedish in general, and information in Swedish aimed at children in particular at the beginning of the pandemic, caused some uncertainty.

Promising initiatives

A new initiative the Åland government took was to hold online meetings during spring 2020 with municipalities and civil society actors to consult and share information on the situation concerning children's rights among other things. Using such forms of agile consultations can be fruitful to shape strategies in an ongoing crisis and could be further developed as a platform for exchange on various themes in normal circumstances.

In September 2020, so-called citizen talks (medborgarsamtal), a form of focus groups open to the public, were held throughout Åland. This was an initiative from the sustainability council Bärkraft.ax and the Åland government aimed directly at engaging the population on sharing thoughts on the pandemic and a way to facilitate participation in overall societal change. Two of the talks were actively aimed at young people. The method is now under consideration as the Åland government proceeds with its recently adopted strategy for democracy, a strategy that notes the importance of and right to participation of children and young people in decision-making and societal development. In 2025, possibilities are to be explored to launch so-called e-panels for children and young people to promote participation in decision-making using a tool provided by the Ministry of Justice in Finland.

Since 2014, Save the Children Åland has employed and trained six so-called pilots

aged 14–17 every summer to promote awareness among children and adults on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2020, the pilots worked on the children's report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, with views and recommendations by Ålandic children to decision-makers on several topics (Save the Children Åland, 2021[PH1]). In 2021, the Åland government cooperated with Save the Children Åland to facilitate the views from children on matters relating to Covid-19, including through meetings with government decision-makers.

Save the Children Åland is an important resource for enabling children's participation in Åland outside the school and daycare environment. Relations, trust, methods, and expertise have been developed before, during, and after the pandemic. Through cooperation with the government, Save the Children Åland has facilitated children's right to be heard in areas such as developing the curriculum for daycare through the provision of methods and materials (2021–2022) and new traffic legislation (Varsa, 2022).

Another promising initiative has been organising a youth council under the umbrella of the Åland federation of organisations working to promote rights of persons with disabilities that was carried out in 2021–2022. The forum gathered young people with disabilities aged 13–24 and held many discussions including sharing experiences from the pandemic.

Both before and after the pandemic, there has been great concern about the health and well-being of children. Improving the situation is a priority for many actors in the governmental and non-governmental sectors. In November 2022, the Åland government launched a 3.5-year project aimed at addressing structural barriers to children's and young people's health and well-being. In 2023, it facilitated a pilot on Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM) in one of the schools. The evaluation of the pilot shows that four out of five pupils thought that YAM helped to improve their knowledge of mental health, stress, and crises.

The Åland government has named one of its ministers as responsible for children's rights, and a long-awaited strategy for children and young people is underway.

Recommendations

- The work to promote children's rights and children's possibilities to participate needs to be in place in normal times to stand a chance of functioning in times of crisis. If structures are in place, with a clear division of responsibilities, roles and channels of communication, and if people know and trust each other, the higher the probability to succeed in a crisis. Building relations and trust between children and adults strengthens resilience.
- Integrate child rights and children's needs into crisis preparedness plans across all sectors, not just education and health, but also transport, culture, and leisure.
- Structures that in normal times are important for children and young people need to be open as far as possible and function in times of crisis.
- Establish clear and shared guidelines for cross-sectoral collaboration between schools, health services, and social services during crises to ensure coordinated support for children.
- Develop information and communication aimed directly at children and young people as well as information for their families and caregivers. Take care to remember children and families with a migrant background as possibilities to receive information in other languages could be crucial.
- Continue efforts to guarantee equal access to digital tools and digital literacy training for all children, especially those in vulnerable situations or living in remote areas.
- Develop and make use of easy-to-reach support mechanisms for children and young people in times of crisis and inform about them in a child-friendly manner. Build on and strengthen the already existing network of support such as school counsellors, psychologists, nurses, etc. Include these functions in overall crisis preparedness groups.
- Set up structures for long-term follow-up on the psychosocial impacts of crises on children, with particular attention to those already in vulnerable situations.
- Support actors who are important to advocating children's and young people's participation, including children with special needs. Decision-makers need to recognise that this is not project-based work, therefore funding must be secured long-term to build and maintain trust and knowledge. At the same time develop and strengthen authorities' own capacity and knowledge to secure the participation of children and young people. Remember to include children and the child rights' perspective in municipal and regional crisis preparedness and contingency planning.

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Upholding children's right to be heard – A Nordic legal perspective

This Nordic-level analysis presents the key findings and concluding observations on the most significant lessons learned regarding the implementation of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – the right of the child to be heard – across the Nordic countries. It draws on national contributions from the Ombudspersons for Children and provides a cross-country assessment of the status, experiences, and challenges related to child participation during and after the pandemic.

A central component of the analysis is the expert evaluation by Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg, former Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Her Nordic-level perspective offers a legal and rights-based assessment of how well the region has upheld children's right to be heard and suggests ways to embed this right in everyday governance and emergency preparedness frameworks.

The objectives of this analysis are threefold

1. Strengthening understanding of how the right of the child to be heard has been realised or disregarded across the Nordic region, and specifically in the context of crisis response and recovery.
2. To support the development of more robust, inclusive, and sustainable systems for child participation by identifying promising practices, initiatives that demonstrate the potential for effective, rights-based participation and that could be adapted or scaled up across the region.

3. Encouraging the Nordic Council of Ministers to facilitate regular, structured dialogue with the Ombudspersons for Children, recognising their role as key child rights advisers. This report may serve as a basis for initiating such a dialogue, with the aim of strengthening Nordic cooperation on children and young people in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The analysis and recommendations are grounded in a child rights-based approach, with the CRC as the normative foundation. What distinguishes this report from previous Nordic Welfare Centre publications is its reliance on insights from the ombudspersons for children in Denmark, Greenland, Finland, Faroe Islands, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Åland, combined with a regional legal analysis. This provides a unique and authoritative perspective on the state of child participation in the region.

Promising practices will be presented in the recommendations section to inspire further development and adaptation across the Nordic region.



Children's right to be heard in Nordic crisis governance – Legal reflections and regional lessons

Author: Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg

Lessons from the pandemic – Child participation in Nordic countries

The Nordic countries adopted a variety of strategies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting national contexts, public health priorities, and governance structures. While approaches differed, all countries implemented measures that had a significant impact on children's everyday lives.

Denmark and Greenland acted early with comprehensive restrictions and border controls to limit the spread of the virus. The Faroe Islands emphasised flexibility by relying primarily on recommendations rather than legislation. Iceland introduced a series of targeted regulations affecting schools, while Sweden sought to maintain in-person education as far as possible. Norway treated the pandemic primarily as a public health crisis, with infection control and hospital capacity guiding many decisions, which led to periods of lockdown and service closures. In Åland, the Finnish emergency powers legislation temporarily extended state authority, affecting schools and children's activities. Finland also implemented national-level measures, including school closures, which applied to Åland as well.

Children's situation during the pandemic in a nutshell

Most of the Nordic countries had several periods of nationwide lockdown and restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The severity and length of the restrictions varied from country to country.

For children and young people, to a varying degree in the different countries, this meant school closures, restrictions on leisure activities, and limited opportunities for social interaction and communication. The restrictions affected issues such as studying, healthcare and social welfare, leisure time, and social relationships. Adverse consequences for children's well-being, learning, inclusion, and mental health have been documented. Positive effects were reported by some children, depending on their age and situation.

Children experienced difficulties with schoolwork as well as stress during distance learning. The pandemic changed children's everyday lives and affected their safety, empowerment, and sense of future. While many children took responsibility for fighting the spread of the virus and obeyed the restrictions, they saw adults breaking the restrictions, which created mistrust among children. Children adjusted their behaviour, made fewer friends, and worried about their family's health and finances. Extracurricular activities disappeared. School became more difficult as motivation dropped. Still, for some children being away from everyday school life meant less bullying and less feeling of exclusion.

In the Faroe Islands, all the schools consulted highlighted the benefits of the shorter school day, as students became more motivated and lessons more effective. The government highlighted as perhaps the most important lesson in the education sector that relationships between students and teachers, and among students, are crucial for learning.

Children had mixed feelings about parents working from home. Some thought it was nice to have more time together, especially young children. Others became desperate for the lack of private life, particularly older children. For many children, the situation became more demanding over time. Gradually there was more loneliness, depression, and children missing their grandparents, etc.

The normal safety nets to protect children had been put out of play. The under-reporting to the child protection services, particularly during spring 2020, raised concerns.

Some children in state care found it easier to be in touch with their social worker digitally while others found it more difficult when they could not have physical meetings.

The pandemic contributed to advancing the use of digital tools. Despite the challenges, digital learning was a positive effort to maintain education, but it also

introduced new obstacles. Some families lacked a stable connection or the necessary computers or tablets. Children facing difficult social circumstances and poverty struggled even more to keep up with their peers.

All in all, children, young people, and their families were strongly affected, although in different ways, by the pandemic and the measures taken to combat it. In general, the effects of the pandemic were more severe for children who were already facing challenges in life.

Despite the extensive consequences for children, their voices and perspectives were largely absent from policy-making processes, which were primarily based on health considerations and the desire to minimise the risk of infection in the wider population. Children and young people were rarely consulted in decision-making processes and had few opportunities to influence decisions, whether at their school, in their community, or society at large. Moreover, decisions were not accompanied by explicit child rights impact assessments (CRIAs). While there were some positive efforts to provide child-friendly information, these initiatives did not reach all children equally, leaving many without access to the guidance they needed.

Children's rights and best interests

The authorities approached the pandemic primarily as a public health crisis, and the consequences for children and young people were not sufficiently addressed. Children's perspectives were mostly not represented in the nations' leadership groups for corona strategy and measures, at least not the first few months. Measures were adopted without a careful assessment of the best interests of the child or the potential effects on children. This applied to broad population-wide measures, such as general lockdown, and to decisions specifically targeting children, particularly closure of schools and leisure activities. It also applied to various other protective and precautionary measures, such as related to respiratory protective equipment, the composition of groups or space arrangements, and the phasing out of measures.

Psychosocial support services to children were limited, and the system for identifying children in need was largely non-functioning, as children were not at school or in other settings apart from their family.

Gradually, children's rights received more attention thanks to the efforts of the Ombudspersons in the different countries, and it became a national goal to protect children and young people. However, in most of the Nordic countries this goal was not achieved in a fully satisfactory way.

The pandemic also had some good effects. For example, in Åland, the Education Act was amended in ways that will make the education sector more prepared to meet future crises.

Children's participation

In the Nordic countries, there is a varying degree of awareness and understanding among adults about the importance of listening to children and involving them in decision-making processes. Children and young people generally have limited opportunities to participate in democratic processes on decisions that affect their lives, both at the local and national levels.

As a general observation, children's views were insufficiently heard and considered during the pandemic. Even in those countries where the authorities normally understand the need to hear children's views in decision-making, the right to participate was not implemented to any great extent during the pandemic, and if so, only gradually.

The pandemic revealed a lack of structured mechanisms for involving children and young people in decision-making in times of crisis, including in essential decisions such as school closures.

Existing structures for child participation were not used, such as youth councils and student councils. Although these bodies could not be convened in person, they could have been consulted digitally.

In the decision-making structures established to manage the pandemic, there was no one to represent children's views, and their views were not included. Children's organisations were not systematically consulted, and their voices were largely absent from the processes guiding key decisions.

Digital channels for hearing children were used to a varying extent in the different countries. For instance, in Finland and Åland there were some good initiatives (see [Recommendations](#)). However, overall, digital tools to engage children could have been more actively and consistently used.

In their own schools, children had no real opportunity to influence how decisions about distance learning or other restrictions were implemented. They were neither consulted nor given the opportunity to express their views before decisions were made, even though the changes had a direct impact on their education and everyday life. This lack of involvement led to feelings of powerlessness and exclusion amongst many.

On a positive note, many children demonstrated a strong willingness to contribute. In Iceland, for instance, children played an active role in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, making a significant contribution to protecting vital societal interests. In Sweden and probably in other countries as well, children were eager to contribute to society and be involved in the measures implemented to stop the infection. Had adults to a greater extent been aware of this motivation and provided opportunities for children in this regard, it could have significantly

strengthened children's sense of empowerment and inclusion.

Children in vulnerable situations

The usual safety nets designed to protect children were either suspended or severely weakened during the pandemic. As a result, vulnerable children faced increased risks in unsafe environments, with limited access to safe spaces such as school or leisure activities. Due to restrictions, their contacts with adults outside the home were fewer, making it more difficult for others to detect signs of distress or abuse.

Teachers, educators, and others were unable to identify the needs of children when they were not in contact with them. If they did identify needs, some school professionals experienced that it was hard to get support from professionals in other sectors.

Although there was clear knowledge and advice emphasising the importance of keeping services for children and young people open, especially schools, it was not sufficiently communicated to decision-makers. If it did reach them, it could take long before it was acted upon.

Children belonging to gender and sexual minorities, those living in financially poor families, and those with health issues experienced a clearer decline in inclusion than other children. As for involving children themselves in finding solutions for children in vulnerable situations, it did not happen.

Information to children

Efforts were made to inform children in a child-friendly manner, and some good practices are mentioned below. However, improvement is sorely needed. Children often did not receive important information, or it arrived too late or was not tailored to their age, needs, or circumstances. There was particularly insufficient communication for young children and children in minority groups, who were often left without accessible or relevant information during critical phases of the pandemic.



Follow-up after the pandemic

At least in some countries, the long-term consequences of the pandemic on children are no longer taken into consideration when the authorities assess challenges, develop policies, and design measures for children and young people.

Throughout the pandemic, serious concerns were raised about lower outcome of education, lack of structure in daily life, reduced services for children with disabilities, increased risk of violence, abuse, and neglect, limited access to leisure activities, and a rise in more severe mental health problems. The pandemic caused an increased risk of exclusion among young people.

Despite this, current policies and measures relating to youth crime, child welfare, mental health, school dropout, and increased use of force against children and young people in various settings often fail to include the pandemic as a factor that may have contributed to the situation and therefore still needs to be addressed.



Recommendations

Based on the input from the Children's Ombudspersons in the Nordic countries, and in line with recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, these are the recommendations that I would make. They offer a roadmap for moving forward. They aim to strengthen the implementation of children's rights, including their rights to participation, development, protection, and best interests, particularly in times of crisis. The term 'children' below covers children and young people.

Main recommendations (specified below)

- Establish and maintain permanent, inclusive **structures** for children's participation at all levels of governance, and use them in times of crisis.
- Provide timely, age-appropriate and accessible **information** to children in relevant languages and formats, including during crises.
- Provide targeted **support** to children at risk of being marginalised, including those facing poverty, disability, or social exclusion, to facilitate their participation.
- Ensure systematic **training** for all relevant professionals working with children, in children's rights, and meaningful participation.
- Undertake systematic **Child Rights Impact Assessments** (CRIA) before measures are adopted and executed, including in times of crisis.
- Ensure children's right to health, survival, and development by safeguarding school **health** services and mental health support to children.
- Ensure children's right to leisure activities and education, even in times of

crisis.

General measures of implementation

Legislation

- A **child rights approach** should be integrated in all legislation, policies, and guidelines related to crisis preparedness and response.
- Countries should have **crisis management legislation** in place, developed, and adopted in normal times (non-crisis) to ensure readiness.
- **Children's participation and best interests** should be explicitly mentioned.

Comprehensive policy and action plans

- Countries should have in place a **national, coordinated policy** with clear structures and action plans for crisis management.
- The policy should include a specific focus on **children, grounded in their rights** as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- There should be a comprehensive **national action plan** on how to safeguard **children's rights** in crisis situations – a dedicated crisis management plan for children. This plan should cover key rights, including children's right to participation, education, health, and protection.
- The plan should have a **child rights approach**. It should
 - be based on views from and knowledge about children,
 - specify how and when children are to be included in crisis-related decision-making, and
 - specify how to discover and follow up children at risk when the normal safety net is suspended or weakened.
 - set up clear, measurable goals and actions to achieve the goals and
 - have a clear division of responsibility across relevant sectors and government levels.
- All **municipalities** should have similar action plans. National guidelines should exist for these plans.
- Protocols for **Rapid Response Mechanisms** should include a child rights perspective.

Coordination

- Well-functioning, high-level cooperation bodies should exist in normal times and should be activated during crisis management to ensure effective cross-sectoral coordination.

- The ministry responsible for children's rights should be formally represented in the national crisis management body.
- The children's ombudspersons should serve as advisors to the crisis management body from the outset of any emergency. This role is complementary to the direct participation of children themselves (see section on participation).

Good practices

Iceland

Initially, the Ministry of Health announced the vaccination of children aged 12–15 without consulting the Ombudsman for Children. However, during preparations for vaccinating even younger children at a later stage, the Ministry engaged in consultation with the Ombudsman, reflecting improved recognition of the importance of child-rights perspectives in public health decisions.

Norway

The government has established a permanent structure – not limited to crisis situations – called the Core Group for Work with Children in Vulnerable Situations (KUBU).

- The Ombudsperson believes KUBU has the potential to significantly impact how the state addresses issues and measures affecting children and young people.
- KUBU consists of the top administrative heads of 8 ministries and the directors of relevant directorates (government agencies), in total 13 different government bodies.
- KUBU receives shared mandates from its responsible ministries (The Core Group of Ministries).
- KUBU focuses on cross-sectoral challenges such as juvenile justice and effective preventative work.

Data collection

- Governments should initiate a comprehensive review of how children and young people have been affected by the pandemic, based on a synthesis of studies, evaluations, and research. The review should
 - identify what children need now and what will be important in the next crisis and
 - give the voices of children and young people strong weight, ensuring that their lived experiences inform future planning and policy.

Good practices

Iceland

In spring 2020, the Ombudsman for Children launched a project collecting children's perspectives on Covid-19. It was repeated several times, the fourth and last in spring 2022, each time with a particular focus (see Iceland's report). A summary and report have been published. These narratives provide valuable insight, and the project serves as a model that could be replicated by responsible authorities in other countries.

Co-operation with civil society

- States should actively consult civil society in the development of child-focused national crisis plans and ensure their involvement in the implementation of these plans.
- Civil society organisations should be recognised as key first responders in crisis and their role be formalised through legislation.

Good practices

Denmark

Several 'economic support packages' were introduced, one key aim of which was to support children's and youth organisations in intensifying their work with vulnerable children and young people.

Sweden

The Swedish Federation of Student Unions held weekly meetings with the Education Department during the pandemic.

Access to justice

- Countries should ensure that all children have access to confidential, child-friendly, and independent complaint mechanisms (General comment No. 14, para. 15 (c), General comment No. 27 on children's access to justice (expected 2027)).

Non-discrimination (Article 2)

- Identify and provide targeted support to groups of children who are especially at risk of being affected during crisis, such as children in economically or socially vulnerable situations or children with disabilities (see General comment No. 5, para. 12).
- The individuality and diversity of children should be taken into account in the countries' use of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA), to facilitate specific measures tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups and young

children.

Best interests of the child (Article 3 no. 1)

- States should include in all relevant legislation a provision stating that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (General comment No. 14, para. 15 (a), 31).
- Legislation should also include clear criteria for how the best interests of the child are to be assessed.
- Systematic Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) should be carried out before measures are adopted and executed, including during times of crisis (General comment No. 14, para. 35).
- This requirement should be reflected in the government regulation or guidelines for impact assessments to be undertaken in the preparations for legislation, budgets, plans, etc.
- Assessments of the challenges children face today, and in the future, should take into account that they have lived through two years of sustained pandemic and that this may have lasting effects on their needs and development.

Good practices

Norway

The best interests of the child and children's right to be heard have been incorporated into the government's impact assessment tools. The Guidance Notes on Instructions for Official Studies (mandatory for all assessments and preparations of central government measures) are a key tool for the impact assessment of public cases. They were updated in 2024 to include specific guidance on both rights.

The Ombudsperson has also developed an e-learning programme on assessing the best interests of the child, both at an individual and system level. The course is intended for everyone working with and for children.

Sweden

'ESV Forum information page on Considering different relevant perspectives in impact assessment' ([Beakta olika relevanta perspektiv i konsekvensutredningen – ESV Forum](#)) is a useful tool. One of the perspectives it highlights is 'Human beings and their rights', with children's rights as one of five sub-topics.

Åland

In spring 2020, online meetings were held with municipalities and civil society actors to consult and share information on the situation concerning children's rights, among others. These consultations proved valuable for shaping strategies during the crisis and could be further developed into a platform for regular exchange both

in emergencies and under normal circumstances.

Right to development (art. 6)

- For children's right to development to be realised, it is vital that countries ensure children's right to participation, as 'child participation is a tool to stimulate the full development of the personality and the evolving capacities of the child' (General comment No. 12, para. 79).

Respect for the views of the child (art. 12)

General

- States should ensure that children and youth are involved in the development, implementation, and monitoring of all relevant legislation, policies, services, and programmes affecting their lives, at school and at the community, local, national, and international levels (General comment No. 20, para. 23, regarding adolescents). Participation requires Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.

Legislation

- Children's right to participate should be clearly embedded in **legislation**.

Structures for participation

- **Permanent, sustainable** structures for hearing children and including their views in decision-making should be established and maintained in normal times (General comment No. 12, para. 19; General comment No. 26, para. 27; Tisdall and Morrison, 2025, 5.4).
- This applies to both individual children and groups of children
- Existing participatory structures must be **upheld and used** in times of crisis (General comment No. 12, para. 125, General comment No. 20, para. 79–80).
- All processes in which a child or children are heard and participate, should fulfil the **requirements** set out in General comment No. 12, para. 134 (a)–(i).
- Structures must be inclusive and accessible, accommodating children with **special needs** and **younger** children (General comment No. 12, paras. 75–78, General comment No. 7, para. 14).
- Mechanisms for involving children in decision-making should exist **at all levels** – nationally, regionally, and locally – and at all stages of the process, from planning to implementation and evaluation.
- **Municipalities** should have structures for involving children and including

- their views in planning and decision-making.
- Youth councils should be established in all municipalities, preferably as a legal requirement.
 - **Schools** should serve as democratic arenas for developing students' critical thinking, collaboration and leadership skills, and local-level participation (General comment No. 20, para. 72).
 - **Student councils** should represent the diversity of students and be actively involved in decision-making on issues of their own choice, including during emergencies, with adult support and guidance.
 - Countries should consider establishing a **Youth Crisis Response Team**, with young people represented among adults, to ensure that young people are actively involved in crisis preparedness, response, and recovery, with real influence in decision-making processes (see the Youth chapter).
 - Participatory structures should be regularly **reviewed and evaluated** to determine whether they function effectively in times of crisis, and children should be involved in this.
 - The obligation to ensure children's participation should be embedded in **mission documents, assignment letters, and mandates**, to ensure that ministries, government agencies, and directorates comply.

Children in vulnerable situations

- Countries should identify and provide targeted support to groups of **children at risk** of not being heard, such as children living in poor families, children from minority backgrounds, and others in vulnerable situations.
- Children with **special needs** should receive adequate support to enable their participation, whether in person or digitally (General comment No. 9 (2006), para. 33, General comment No. 12, para. 134 (e), General comment No. 25, paras 9–11).
- **Digital** alternatives may be helpful, both at the individual and group level, particularly as a way to compensate for not participating in youth councils or similar forums.
- **Young children** should receive the necessary support to participate. Kindergartens should involve children to empower them and help them develop participating skills.
- Countries should **support key actors** who are important in enabling children's participation, including children with special needs.

Good practices

Åland

A youth council under the umbrella of the Åland Federation of Organisations working to promote rights of persons with disabilities was carried out in 2021–2022. The forum gathered young people with disabilities aged 13–24 and held many discussions including sharing experiences from the pandemic. A report with recommendations was produced as a result.

Methodology

- **A variety of methods** for facilitating children's participation should be gathered at national and Nordic level and made available to authorities at all levels.
- **Digital methods of participation** should be established to ensure broad and inclusive participation (see General comment No. 25, paras 16–18). Such methods should be used where in-person meetings are not possible, or as a complement to physical meetings.
- Each country should consider establishing a **national resource centre** for child participation, to gather and develop methodology, provide training, and give support and advice to authorities at all levels. A Nordic institution could be given a coordination role, for instance NORDBUK.

Good practices

Finland

A national online survey conducted by the Ministry of Education and Culture explored the experiences of pupils in basic education from spring and early autumn 2020. The results were used to inform the development of legislation on education. More than 58,000 pupils responded.

Finland

Children's ombudsperson's mechanisms:

- Young advisers' model. Regular discussions with different groups of children representing the lives and everyday realities of children, 6–10 meetings annually
- Child barometer. A telephone survey every two years on the lives and everyday realities of children aged 6–7, aiming to examine children's own views on themes that concern them.
- Creative studies of children's views, for example a study in which third-graders drew, painted, and wrote about their coronavirus experiences. The publication showed that it only takes minor arrangements to collect information on the views of even a large group of children and that it is important to offer children several alternative ways of expressing

themselves, their own experiences, and thought.

Finland (and Åland exploring)

The Digiraati digital panel, widely introduced in 2024, is an online service maintained and produced by the Ministry of Justice. It enables everyone aged under 29 years to get their voice heard on various societal issues. A final statement is formed on the topic discussed by the panel, published in the service and forwarded by the panel organiser to relevant authorities. Panels can be organised by ministries, municipalities, well-being services, counties, other authorities, schools, educational institutions, or non-governmental organisations.

Norway

[Digital participation is described at p. 28 in the Barneombudet's participation handbook.](#)

Åland

In September 2020, 'citizen talks' (medborgarsamtal) – focus groups open to the public – were held throughout Åland. They were organised by the sustainability council (Bärkraft.ax) and the Åland government, aimed directly at engaging the population to share thoughts on the pandemic and a way to facilitate participation in overall societal change. Two of the sessions were specifically targeted at young people.

Since 2014, Save the Children Åland has employed and trained six 'pilots' aged 14–17 years every summer to raise awareness among children and adults on the United Nations' Child Rights' Convention.

Feedback to children

- Countries should ensure that decision-makers inform the children of the outcome of the process and explain how their views were considered. The feedback is a guarantee that children's views are heard not only as a formality, but are taken seriously (General comment No. 12, para. 45).

Training

- Countries should ensure that professionals working with and for children receive training on a regular basis on how to talk to children, listen to them, take their views into account, and provide feedback after decisions are made (General comment No. 12, para. 134 (g)).

Good practices

Denmark

Parents and professionals who work with children are provided with tools to support conversations with them about their experiences. For example, the Danish Public Health Authority developed materials for schools and parents to help them talk to children about Covid-19.

Norway

The Ombudsperson has developed an e-learning programme offering guidance on child participation, both at an individual and a systems level. The courses will be useful for everyone working with and for children.

Snakkemedbarn.no is a free, interactive online resource developed by the Norwegian Competence Centres for Violence and Traumatic Stress (RVTS) to help professionals such as teachers, healthcare workers, and social services staff practise sensitive conversations with children and adolescents about difficult topics like abuse, neglect, and trauma (in Norwegian only).

Empowering youth

- Youth should be seen as a resource not only in crises but also in everyday governance and planning (General comment No. 20, para. 2–4, 23). Regular involvement empowers children and youth and is a means of political and civil engagement (General comment No. 20, para. 24), fostering readiness and confidence to contribute during emergencies.
- Voluntary work involving young people and senior citizens could be organised in a systematic way outside of crisis situations, to help youth build agency and a sense of contribution and belonging to the society.
- Communities could engage young people in voluntary work (inspired by World War 2) as part of society's response to crises, by youth supporting youth, young people visiting elderly people, or contributing in other ways.

Right to information, Articles 12 and 17

The child's right to access information is a prerequisite for realising children's participation under Article 12, as well as a stand-alone right under Article 17, see General comment No. 12 para. 82.

- When children are invited to express their views, they must be provided with clear, accessible, and relevant information about the issue at hand, the broader context, options, and possible decisions to be taken and their consequences (General comment No. 12, para. 25).
- The information must be timely, age-appropriate, and adapted to children's varying needs.

- In times of crisis, there should be information and communication specifically aimed at children and young people, as well as their families and caregivers (General comment No. 26, para. 34, in the context of climate change-related disasters).
- Information should be presented through channels that children use, such as digital platforms (General comment No. 20, paras. 47–48, General comment No. 25, paras 50–53) and other relevant media.
- Information should be available in multiple languages to ensure that every child has access to information in their own language. [This includes Sami, which is recognised as both an Indigenous and a national minority language in the Nordic region.](#)
- In times of no crisis, information about crisis preparedness should also be made available to children in a child-friendly format.

Good practices

Websites

Lilla krisinfo launched in 2023 by the **Swedish** Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), which is part of the national website krisinformation.se, provides child-friendly information on crises and current events. The website presents information in a way that is easily accessible and adapted to children's needs and questions.

National information campaigns

The **Swedish** Public Health Agency ran a Covid-19 campaign aimed at children, adolescents, and young adults in all forms of school and educational settings.

In **Iceland**, the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management placed emphasis on ensuring that children received appropriate information.

Television Channels

DR Ultra, a children and youth television channel on **Denmark's** largest public service broadcaster, Danmarks Radio, produced some special programmes where children had the opportunity to ask virus experts about their concerns and experiences.

Lilla aktuellt is a programme broadcast by **Swedish** Television (SVT) since 1993 and aimed at children aged 9–12. The programme brings adapted news, providing children with social information in an accessible way. Many schools in Sweden regularly include Lilla Aktuellt in their lessons.

Press conferences for children and young people

The Prime Minister of **Denmark** participated in a number of press conferences during the lockdown where DR Ultra's child reporters had the opportunity to ask questions about Covid-19.

The **Swedish** Minister for Children's Affairs held press conferences for children and young people about the pandemic. This is also seen in several other Nordic

countries.

Right to health, Article 24

- School health services should be safeguarded during crises. School health nurses should not be reassigned to other duties. If children are not physically present at school, the nurse and other services should remain accessible in alternative ways.
- Mental health and psychosocial support services should be easily accessible for children in times of crisis.
- In implementing measures such as testing and vaccination, special attention should be paid to children.

Good practices

Greenland

A corona hotline was set up under [the existing Tusaannga helpline](#).

Iceland

Following the Ombudsman's intervention, children were tested separately, allowed to move ahead in queues, and assigned specifically selected testing staff. The Ombudsman also argued against vaccinating children at school during school hours, because schools should be a safe place for children.

Åland

A project launched in 2022 to address structural barriers to children's and young people's mental health and well-being, and the Youth Aware of Mental Health pilot in a school to improve children's knowledge of mental health, stress, and crisis.

Right to education, Article 28 and 29

- States should develop **national digital education platforms** to ensure continuity of learning during emergencies and for children otherwise unable to attend school in person.

Right to leisure activities, Article 31

- Countries should ensure children's access to leisure activities even in times of crisis.
- If restrictions must be imposed, they should be adapted to children's situation with the aim of keeping activities open as far as possible.
- National and local authorities should involve civil society organisations and children in decision-making in this regard.
-

Countries should ensure that children are provided with information about alternative ways of engaging in activities together with their peers.



Nordic co-operation, recommendations

General measures of implementation

To strengthen and unify a **Nordic approach** to addressing challenges during crises, the Nordic countries should:

- Adopt a **joint declaration** reaffirming the shared commitment to protecting children's rights in exceptional circumstances.
- Develop a Nordic **structure and policy for co-operation in crisis**. This would enable timely exchange of knowledge, tools, and expertise, supporting the harmonisation of practices between national systems. By building on existing trust and shared values, this framework could improve the Nordic countries' ability to respond to crises in a coordinated, effective, and child-centred manner.
- Establish a **forum** for sharing good examples and practices to support benchmarking and create synergies for the political advancement of children's rights, particularly for children in vulnerable situations.
- Designate a **contact point**, such as a Nordic Children's Ombudsperson, to ensure that children can move freely across borders in the Nordic countries, when necessary, for example, when parents or siblings live in another Nordic country, and to support parents working across borders.
- Develop guidelines for creating **national and municipal action plans**.
- Compare national **strategies** for handling a crisis – and make corresponding Nordic strategies to bridge actions.
-

Share Protocols for **Rapid Response Mechanisms**.

- Share **guidelines and frameworks for crisis preparedness** to ensure that children's perspectives are systematically integrated across the region.
- Promote **collaborative research initiatives and policy evaluations** to strengthen the evidence base for child-focused crisis responses.
- **Harmonise legislation** concerning children and parents across the Nordic countries to facilitate cooperation, for example, regarding contact after parental separation.
- **Civil society organisations**, such as Save the Children and Red Cross, can be valuable partners in supporting children's participation.

Respect for the views of the child, Article 12

- Develop a shared approach to ensuring that children are **meaningfully involved** in decisions that directly affect their lives, including through Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) and structures for hearing children.
- Share experiences on how **municipalities** can fulfil their obligation to involve children and include their views in planning and decision-making.
- Share experiences on how to strengthen children's opportunities to **participate in legislative process**.
- Develop and share **digital participation** methods and continue to innovate in this area.
- Share experiences on **legislation, practices, and methods** to uphold children's right to be heard during crises, in order to recommend well-founded practices and methods for the future.
- Engage **researchers** to explore children's views. Youth surveys are done in all countries, and there is potential for more Nordic cooperation on research about the implementation of children's rights through existing Nordic institutions like the Nordic Welfare Centre NordForsk and Nordregio.

The Nordic countries could also co-operate on

- Accurate and accessible **information** for children (art. 17),
- **Mental Health** Support (art. 24), and
- Programmes for **economic** assistance (art. 27 on standard of living).

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Summary for action: Six strategic priorities for Nordic co-operation on child rights in crises

To support the implementation of the more detailed legal and policy analysis presented in this chapter, this summary highlights six overarching priorities for Nordic co-operation. These priorities are intended to guide decision-makers and practitioners in strengthening child rights in future crises. They reflect shared challenges and opportunities identified across the region and are grounded in the recommendations of Professor Kirsten Sandberg and the Nordic Ombudspersons for Children.

1. Build lasting structures for child participation

Establish permanent, inclusive mechanisms that ensure children and young people are systematically involved in decision-making – not only during crises, but as part of everyday governance. This strengthens democratic culture and crisis resilience.

Recommended actions:

- Share Nordic models for youth councils, school-based participation, and national strategies.
- Ensure these structures are active during crises, including digital formats.
-

Encourage municipalities to maintain youth councils and student councils with real influence.

2. Embed child rights in crisis legislation and preparedness

Develop national and Nordic-level action plans that include mandatory Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA), clear responsibilities, and cross-sectoral coordination. This ensures that children's rights are not overlooked when decisions must be made quickly.

Recommended actions:

- Include children's rights explicitly in national crisis laws and emergency plans.
- Mandate Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) in all phases of crisis planning.
- The Nordic Council of Ministers for Health and Social Affairs could coordinate shared frameworks.

3. Ensure inclusive communication and access to information

Guarantee that all children – including those in vulnerable situations – receive timely, age-appropriate, and accessible information in relevant languages and formats. This is essential for participation, protection, and trust in public institutions.

Recommended actions:

- Develop child-friendly communication tools in multiple languages and formats.
- Ensure information reaches children in vulnerable situations and minority groups.
- Use digital platforms and media channels that children already use.

4. Strengthen Nordic collaboration and shared learning

Develop joint frameworks, share good practices, and coordinate research and preparedness efforts across borders. A unified Nordic approach enhances efficiency, equity and impact – and ensures that no child is left behind, regardless of where they live.

Recommended actions:

- Create joint frameworks and share good practices across countries.
-

- Coordinate research and preparedness efforts through Nordic institutions.
- Facilitate structured dialogue between ombudspersons and ministries.

5. Systematise the use of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA)

Ensure that CRIA is used consistently in all phases of crisis planning and response. This helps identify risks early, include children's perspectives, and improve the quality and legitimacy of decisions affecting children.

Recommended actions:

- Develop a shared Nordic CRIA framework with common tools and training.
- Ensure CRIA is used consistently in all decision-making affecting children.
- Include CRIA requirements in government guidelines and mandates.

6. Strengthen adult competence in child participation

Provide regular training for professionals and decision-makers on how to listen to, involve, and support children meaningfully. This builds institutional capacity and ensures that participation is not symbolic but embedded in practice.

Recommended actions:

- Provide regular training for professionals on how to involve children meaningfully.
- Develop joint Nordic training programmes and professional networks.
- Support national resource centres for child participation and share methods regionally.

About the publication

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