



Nordic Welfare  
Centre

# The right of children and young people to be heard, seen, and involved in the Nordic region

CONFERENCE REPORT



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This publication is also available online in a web-accessible version at:  
<https://nordicwelfare.org/pub/good-and-equal-health-in-the-nordics-conference-report>



## 1. Introduction

This report summarizes the key findings and insights from the conference [The right of children and young people to be heard, seen, and involved in the Nordic region](#), held in Helsinki on 4–5 June 2025. The event, hosted by the Nordic Welfare Centre, marked the conclusion of a four-year initiative launched in 2021 to strengthen the right of children and young people to participate in decision-making — particularly in response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Launched in 2021 and supported by NORDBUK and the [Nordic Council of Ministers](#), the project responded to research showing that children's voices were largely overlooked during the pandemic.

### **The legal foundation – Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

At the heart of this initiative lies Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. These views must be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. This principle is not only a democratic ideal — it is a binding legal obligation for all Nordic countries, and it must be operationalised in both everyday governance and crisis response. The project aims to ensure that, in the future, children's and young people's views are taken seriously in matters that affect them in everyday life, as well as during times of crisis.

Children and young people have not only participated in this conference — they have been central to the entire four-year project. They have contributed to all reports and some have served as permanent representatives in the

project's steering group, ensuring that youth perspectives have shaped both process and outcomes.



### **Overview of the project's publications**

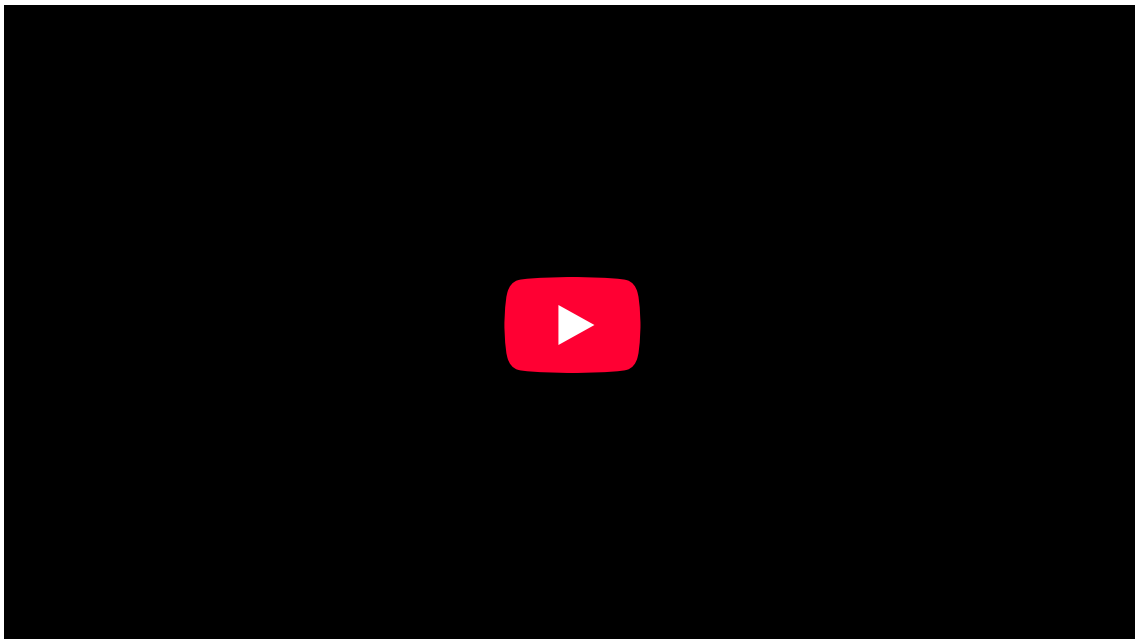
The following reports have been published as part of the project:

1. [Restricted childhood, interrupted youth](#)
2. [Children and young people's participation during the Corona pandemic – Nordic initiatives](#)
3. [Child and youth participation during crisis – Recommendations for decision makers in the Nordic region](#)
4. [Nordic youth voices – the pandemic and the right to be heard](#)
5. [Student councils and democratic participation in the Nordic region](#)
6. [Participation is protection – embedding children's rights in Nordic crisis governance](#), based on this conference.
7. A final report will be launched this autumn with a focus on children's right to participation in leisure — an essential arena for inclusion, development, and belonging.

## Conference highlights

The conference brought together researchers, advocates, policymakers and young people to discuss key findings and ways to enhance involvement of children and young people in decision-making, particularly during crises. Many of the speakers were young people themselves.

Rather than concluding the project, the conference marked a starting point for continued action. Insights gathered through workshops will inform future research and policy. Youth contributions during this conference have directly informed the report [Participation is protection – embedding children's rights in Nordic crisis governance](#), which was launched at the Democracy Festival in Arendal 12 August 2025.



Broadcast from seminar at Arendalsuka (in Scandinavian languages)

## Key messages

- Children's right to be heard is a legal obligation.
- Children and youth must be involved in all decisions that affect them — especially in times of crisis.
- Youth have played a central role throughout this project.
- The revision of the Helsinki Agreement offers a unique opportunity to embed children's rights structurally in Nordic co-operation.
- Participation leads to better decisions, stronger inclusion, and more resilient societies.



## 2. Youth participation in the Nordic co-operation

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### Konsta Lindi, representing the board of Nordic Youth Council

[The Nordic Youth Council](#) (UNR) serves as a formal platform for youth political organisations to influence the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers. Representing the board of Nordic Youth Council Konsta Lindi highlighted the significance of its members feeling that policymakers hear their voices.

He pointed out that the council is predominantly composed of white young people from middle or upper-class backgrounds, meaning it cannot fully represent all young people.

Lindi argued that there is an urgent need to involve more young people in society, highlighting the fact that half of young people chose not to vote in the municipal and county elections in Finland in the spring of 2025, as one example.

*– We genuinely need to reimagine what participation in politics and Nordic co-operation looks like for young people. Political institutions aren't sexy, and that's a shame.*

Action is needed to increase youth involvement. Lindi, who grew up in eastern Finland, did not initially feel much a part of Nordic co-operation. However, he later realised that many of the challenges he faced could be addressed through such collaboration — for example, the Nordic exchange programme

that provides work opportunities for young people across the region, or by studying abroad in another Nordic country.

To increase the involvement of young people in decision-making, Konsta Lindi urges policymakers to give greater weight to the opinions of young people.

*– Young people need to feel that they are listened to and taken seriously. Growing up, we were all told to be quiet while the grown-ups were talking, and now it is time to flip the script. I see it as my duty to empower and inform other young people to use their voice.*

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**The Nordic youth aren't merely future taxpayers, but living, breathing citizens right here today.**

– Konsta Lindi, representing the board of Nordic Youth Council

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### **Viggo Kalman, Youth representative in The Nordic Committee for Children and Young People, NORDBUK**

NORDBUK is the Nordic Council of Ministers' advisory and coordinating body on issues concerning children and young people. It consists of 16 members: eight youth representatives and eight government members. The committee's work is guided by the vision of making the Nordic region the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up.

One of NORDBUK's key priorities is to support and promote children's and young people's right to be heard in all matters that affect them, as well as their active participation in democratic processes. Viggo Kalman noted that the voices of young people were not taken into account during the pandemic.

*– This was not because our opinions lacked value, but mainly due to a lack of systems and readiness to include young people where it matters most. Children and young people were left out; our voices were not heard, and*

*decisions were made for us but not with us.*

NORDBUK is actively contributing to the ongoing revision of the Helsinki Agreement, which currently does not mention children and young people. The revision process presents a unique opportunity to embed children's rights in Nordic co-operation, with proposals to include youth participation as a dedicated theme and formally recognize the Nordic Youth Council.

Discussions held with youth during this conference have directly informed the report [Participation is protection – embedding children's rights in Nordic crisis governance](#), launched at the Democracy Festival in Arendal in August. The report highlights the need to strengthen child participation in crisis governance and calls for structural change across the Nordic region.

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## **Anders Adlercreutz, Minister of Education and Nordic co-operation, Finland**

Finland, together with Åland, holds the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2025. Minister Anders Adlercreutz described the conference as significant in the ongoing effort to strengthen the involvement of young people in the Nordic region.

*– This initiative forms part of a wider Nordic effort to empower children and young people, ensuring that their voices are heard and that they are involved in all decisions affecting their lives.*

One of the key priorities of the Finnish presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers is to promote the rights and participation of children and young people. Minister Adlercreutz emphasised that the Nordic countries, who take pride in being inclusive and equal societies, are not truly complete unless everyone – not only adults – is fully recognised.

*– That recognition must include the right to be heard, to be seen, and to be genuinely involved. Participation is not a privilege; it is a right that must be respected regardless of age. Even though the participation of children and young people has a strong legal basis and a long history in our countries, it is only as strong as we make it.*

Minister Adlercreutz also underlined the challenges concerning mental health, among other issues, that affect many young people. He highlighted the need

for Nordic collaboration in addressing these concerns.

*– Sudden shocks, like the pandemic, can reveal systemic weaknesses that we had not even realised were there. For example, the proper social role of schools became all the more evident once studies moved online.*

Minister Anders Adlercreutz mentioned several projects within the Finnish authorities aimed at strengthening youth participation. He also emphasised the significance of young people's strong involvement in the project at the Nordic Welfare Centre, leading up to this conference and the forthcoming reports.

*– This sends a clear message: in Nordic co-operation, we do not talk about young people without involving them. Together, we can make the Nordic region a global model for safeguarding the rights of children and young people even in times of crisis.*

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**Participation is not a privilege; it is a right that must be respected regardless of age.**

– Anders Adlercreutz, Minister of Education and Nordic co-operation, Finland



### 3. Research findings and lessons learned

#### Involvement and participation of children and youth in the Nordic region during the pandemic

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##### **Jakob Trane Ibsen, Chief Analyst, VIVE – Danish Centre for Social Research**

Jakob Trane Ibsen outlined the main findings of two reports developed as part of the project on Nordic co-operation concerning children's and young people's opportunities for participation and development following the Covid-19 pandemic. The main questions examined how children and young people were affected by the various Covid-19 measures, and to what extent they were involved.

Jakob Trane Ibsen says the first takeaway was that health concerns dominated the policies in the Nordic countries, even though the individual policies varied. Concerns about the effects on children and youth were not particularly evident in policymaking, despite common concerns being identified.

*– There was a focus on mental health and well-being, but less on participation. Very little research was conducted to inform decision-makers about the consequences of participation.*

When examining studies on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people, varying results were found. Some children enjoyed studying at home, while others were severely impacted.

*– We found increasing inequalities; the effects varied greatly among different groups of young people. Vulnerable groups were disproportionately affected, and their access to social life became even more limited. There is a need for extra resources for these groups.*

Different age groups were affected in various ways, with factors such as their study environments and leisure activities also influencing their overall well-being. Jakob Trane Ibsen notes that the studies examining these topics mainly focused on short-term effects, while there is little explicit knowledge of the long-term effects of the Covid-19 measures.

Open questions include whether the decrease in learning observed during the pandemic will persist or subside. The long-term effects on mental health also remain uncertain, as the pandemic accelerated an already declining mental health among young people, but did not necessarily initiate it.

*– The primary concern we identified relates to social competence, including knowing how to navigate social contexts and experiencing a sense of social connectedness. We encountered numerous issues related to this. What this means varies between different groups, and this makes it extra essential to hear the perspectives of the children and youth themselves.*

Jakob Trane Ibsen states that the research has so far not yielded any systemic solutions to address this problem.

*– Covid was a healthcare crisis that triggered a social, political, and economic crisis. It may seem very demanding to say that we need to consider the perspectives of children and young people.*

Ibsen states that it is nevertheless crucial to involve young people for several reasons. By involving them, they are encouraged to participate in a democratic tradition. Involvement is also necessary to achieve compliance with the new norms and regulations, and to gain an understanding of their meaning and the effects they have.

Ibsen also emphasises that the structures for the participation of children and youth must be active before a crisis occurs. These structures both include youth councils and international collaboration, as well as everyday

interactions with children and youth.

*– One of our findings was that in the cases we examined, where such instances had already been activated, they proved to be helpful during the pandemic. We must maintain these structures now that we have returned to normal.*

## **Welfare among Children and Young People in the Post-Pandemic Nordics**

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**Bethina Strandberg-Jensen, Senior Adviser and Coordinator of the Nordic research funding initiative on children and young people at NordForsk**

[NordForsk](#) is a research funding institution established by the Nordic Council of Ministers with the role of facilitating and supporting research collaboration across the Nordic region.

As the coordinator of the project [Welfare among Children and Young People in the Post-pandemic Nordics](#), NordForsk highlights the importance of Nordic research co-operation. Eight different research projects were funded, focusing on various aspects of young people's lives after the pandemic. Key factors were the long-term consequences of the pandemic and the genuine involvement of young people.

This collaboration is essential for understanding the health and well-being of children and young people after the Covid-19 pandemic, especially given the similar societal structures across the Nordic countries.

*– The goal is to increase knowledge and improve understanding of how the pandemic affected children and young people, reducing adverse effects, promoting resilience, and strengthening crisis preparedness.*

The projects are expected to finish in 2027, but Bethina Strandberg-Jensen was already able to present some preliminary findings.

[The SISU project, on Post-pandemic Vulnerability and Resilience](#), has found that mental health among Finnish youth has not returned to pre-pandemic

levels. Symptoms of anxiety, depression and social anxiety increased during the pandemic and remained high in 2023, while loneliness has decreased. Boys showed a slight improvement in mental health, but the situation for girls remained the same.

*– The research had expected that mental health would improve after the pandemic, but this has not happened. The effects seem to be long-lasting.*

Preliminary findings from the project titled "Psychological distress among Finnish students with disabilities" show that students with disabilities reported significantly more psychological distress than those without disabilities, as well as greater loneliness.



## 4. Recommendations for future crises

### Recommendations on participatory structures for decision makers, insights from Nordic youth

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#### Lisa Sjöblom, Child Rights Expert, Fasil

As one of the authors of [the report Child and youth participation during crisis](#), Lisa Sjöblom, presented some of its key recommendations for decision-makers in the Nordic region.

*– The purpose of this project was to provide detailed recommendations on how the right to participation can be secured during a crisis. We used lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, but our aim was to build better Nordic preparedness for child and youth participation during any future crisis.*

The process included focus groups with child and youth representatives and decision-makers, as well as a conference on the topic. The recommendations in the report are mainly supported by the young people taking part in the project and are as follows.

Establishment of participatory structures. It is essential to establish strong frameworks for youth participation before a crisis arises. This comprises, among other elements, crisis plans as well as simulations and training.

Positive attitudes and habits. It is essential to invest time in building relations and creating good habits before a crisis. Decision makers must regard young people as invaluable resources.

Enhance child rights and youth competencies among decision-makers.

Educate all decision-makers on child and youth participation and cultivate awareness of the position of power.

Make a knowledgeable and deliberate choice of level and method. Gather youths' perspectives through various methods and provide information through channels that are accessible and relevant to them.

*– If children and young people can't be involved in a decision, make a conscious choice about it. Never engage in manipulated participation or include young people merely as decoration without actually listening to their perspective, Lisa Sjöblom states.*

Inclusion and non-discrimination should be guiding principles in all decision-making, and this principle should also apply to working with young people. As decision-makers, when things go wrong, take responsibility.

The quality of participation in times of crisis. Involve children and youth in decision-making processes before decisions are made, rather than after. Ensure that you inform children and youth about how their input was utilised.

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**Never engage in manipulated participation or include young people merely as decoration without actually listening to their perspective**

– Lisa Sjöblom, Child Rights Expert, Fasil

## **Youth leisure - a key to resilience in times of crisis**

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**Åsa Gunvén, Political scientist, Coordinator of a regional knowledge centre for open youth work in Stockholm & Monica Johansson, PhD graduate from Jönköping International Business School**

Meaningful leisure may be key to resilience during times of crisis and an essential element of young people's overall well-being. Presenting the

preliminary findings from the report Leisure – an anchor when it storms, which was still being written at the time of the conference, Monica Johansson explains that the aim of the report is to examine what happened to young people when the leisure sector mostly closed down during the pandemic.

*– The resilience of youth was impacted by the loss of leisure. Togetherness is a vital aspect of building resilience, and online activities were unable to compensate for this sense of connection. One can't truly experience togetherness in the same way online, Monica Johansson says.*

*– At football practice, it is not kicking the ball that builds resilience. Resilience is built afterwards, in the dressing room or on the walk together with the coach towards the bus, Åsa GUNVÉN explains.*

Some of the points that emerged from the interviews conducted for the report include that, during the pandemic, much attention was directed towards keeping schools open. At the same time, leisure was not regarded as necessary. Changing restrictions made it difficult to adapt, and the youth sector became extremely cautious about taking risks.

*– The youth councils and youth umbrella organisations became a kind of hotline for leisure activity organisers, as the youth organisations interpreted the restrictions and could provide clear answers when the organisers contacted them to ask whether they could arrange an activity, Åsa GUNVÉN explains.*

Throughout the pandemic, some leisure activities were able to continue by being moved outdoors or online. However, digital meetings could not replace physical gatherings, as the togetherness in a more profound sense was missing.

*– Some groups of young people were lost during the shift to digital, as the threshold was too high. Those who dropped out never returned, and this remains true even after the pandemic, GUNVÉN says.*

Some online activities also shifted focus. Reliable adults proved to be more important for building resilience than the activity itself and simply meeting and talking online was seen as more important than engaging in the leisure activity. At the same time, the loss of safe and guided leisure spaces has had a lasting impact on social skills.

*– Since the pandemic, the level of conflict among young people has risen.*

*Every second young person experiences challenges in maintaining social relationships. One in five young individuals encounters significant difficulties in this area.*

The loss of leisure affected different groups of youth unevenly. LGBTQIA+-youth, youth with disabilities, youth with fewer economic and social opportunities, youth living further from participation, and girls were more severely impacted than others.

The role of leisure, and the cornerstone in building resilience, are captured by four key words: 'Having', 'Doing', 'Loving', and 'Being'. This concept was borrowed by other researchers in the field.

In light of this study, looking at leisure as a resilience provider, 'Having' corresponds to safe leisure spaces, supportive adults, and low-threshold inclusion. 'Doing' is about participation, responsibility, and personal development. 'Loving' corresponds to the feeling of togetherness, emotional support, and social skills, and 'Being' relates to the feeling of harmony and balance.

For the upcoming report, some draft recommendations were presented at the conference.

From a longer list of recommendations, the following were highlighted:

- Be prepared and ensure contingency planning for leisure activities is in place at all levels.
- Develop policies to support a swift start-up and compensation phase, as relationships with young people are often lost after three months.
- Prioritise meaningful inclusion of young people and maintain clear communication to provide them with information.
- Focus should also be given to offering safe leisure spaces.

## Empowering student councils and youth participation in schools

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**Ragný Þóra Guðjohnsen, Assistant Professor at the University of Iceland & Eva Harðardóttir, Assistant Professor at the University of Iceland**

The new report [Student councils and democratic participation in the Nordic region](#) was launched during the conference. The study is based on the Lundy Model, a conceptual framework for operationalising children's right to participate in decisions affecting them.

The researchers collected four types of data: policy mapping, a student survey, information gathered from young experts at youth summits, and interviews conducted with students and teachers.

*– The findings from the policy mapping show that student councils are regarded as an essential platform for student participation within Nordic education policy documents. However, in practice, we noticed that students do not always feel that their head teachers are involved or interested in the work of the student council, Eva Harðardóttir says.*

The survey revealed that in most schools, a student council exists. However, there are variations among the Nordic countries regarding the level of awareness of these councils among students, their understanding of the issues addressed by student councils, and the extent to which school leaders consider the ideas of student councils.

*– This means that the aims and the scope of student councils need to be better introduced in schools, Ragný Þóra Guðjohnsen says.*

*– During the Covid-19 pandemic, student councils were largely, or in some cases completely, excluded from the decision-making processes when they could have been utilised as an essential platform for communication, Eva Harðardóttir says.*

The report also reflects some positive trends and practices, such as broader discussions regarding students' physical and mental health, among other topics, being addressed through the platform of student councils.

The report concludes with a new model for supporting inclusive and meaningful student councils. The model highlights five interrelated supporting factors, relating to open and inclusive access, clear structures and administration, democratic communication, global values and culture, and meaningful engagement and choice of issues.

## **4.1 Status on the right of children and young people to be heard in the Nordic region, the Nordic Children's Ombudspersons**

The four general principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and the right to be heard.

The right to be heard is central to the work leading up to this conference, as well as to the [report on how the children's right to be heard was upheld or overlooked during the pandemic](#). At the time of the conference, the report was being produced in collaboration with the Nordic ombudspersons for children, Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg, and the Nordic Welfare Centre.

The aim of the report is to provide clear, actionable recommendations for establishing stronger participation systems so they can be in place before the next crisis. Crisis preparedness is a central priority of the Finnish-Åland presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, with youth participation as a key element.

During the conference, some Nordic ombudspersons for children's rights shared their views on the children's right to be heard in times of crisis.

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### **Salvör Nordal, Iceland**

*– This is a very important topic. We have a great deal to learn from Covid-19, and the results from the ongoing research projects presented at this conference will be highly valuable to us.*

Salvör Nordal states that when fundamental rights are at stake, children's rights are often the first to be violated in a crisis. She says it became very apparent during the pandemic that Iceland has not implemented the CRIA, which stands for Child Rights Impact Assessment. This would have been needed when restrictions became stricter.

– We attempted to provide more accessible information for children on our website. We also sought to gather children's perspectives on each decision made, but reaching all families, especially those with an immigrant background, was not possible.

Salvör Nordal says CRIA would also have been needed in other crises, for example, when families were being evacuated from a volcanic eruption.

Salvör Nordal says her office collected the views of children during the pandemic, but the children were not able to influence the decision-making. This is something Nordal wants to change before the next crisis.

– Children should have a voice in the country's crisis management. My message is that Iceland has to implement CRIA at all levels.

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## Hanna Vang, Faroe Islands

– *We were not as severely struck as many of the other Nordic countries because we are smaller and have a more flexible legal structure. The crisis was not managed as much by law as by recommendation, Hanna Vang explains.*

An epidemic committee composed of various experts in society, including police and health officials, made the recommendations. This structure was established long ago during previous epidemics.

– *The pandemic committee neither requested a CRIA nor consulted children on the recommendations made. Later, a psychologist was added to the committee, who raised the children's perspective to a certain degree, but not to the level one would desire from a CRIA assessment.*

After the pandemic, the student councils in all the schools in the Faroe Islands have been strengthened which will bolster the structures for the next crisis.

– *It has become clear that children's voices need to be strengthened.*

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## Mina Gerhardsen, Norway

*– During the pandemic, our government was not very receptive to public pressure regarding children's needs. Later evaluations concluded that the government failed to protect children during the pandemic. All the decisions were made in good faith, but the government was ill-prepared.*

Considering the consequences of the pandemic on children in Norway, the experiences varied, Mina Gerhardsen explains. Children from supportive homes tended to fare better during the pandemic. Conversely, those from challenging family situations experienced a more difficult time during this period.

*– You could compare it to a multiplier or a looking glass. It enhanced the existing situation for better or worse.*

Mina Gerhardsen says it is hard to exactly pinpoint what causes many of the challenges we are facing now, such as increased mental health problems among young people, crime and school absence.

*– It seems that merely living in a time of global emergency has an impact, irrespective of individual experiences. Additionally, we have existing trends that may or may not have been influenced by the pandemic. What is clear, however, is that children and young people were not included in the decision-making, and the established structures for listening to children were not utilised. It was a lost opportunity.*

In future crises, Mina Gerhardsen says, the right of the child to be heard must be taken into account. This means including children's participation and establishing solid structures to prepare for future emergencies.

*– We don't know what the next crisis will be, but we know that it will affect children. And we know that we must do better next time in protecting and including children. We have no time to waste in completing this job.*

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**We don't know what the next crisis will be, but we know that it will affect children.**

– Mina Gerhardsen, Norway

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## Elina Pekkarinen, Finland

*– I believe the Finnish government acted very wisely at the outset. They established a specific independent scientific panel comprising individuals from various disciplines, and they invited me to participate as well, which was an excellent way to incorporate children's and young people's perspectives into the panel's work.*

Elina Pekkarinen regrets that the financing of the panel was cut short, which led to the long-term assessments of the consequences of the recommendations being missed.

*– I think the pandemic in Finland forced us to find new methods of listening to children and young people. However, it revealed that our crisis plans do not sufficiently take children into account. This is a problem still. We have not yet discussed the scary thing of how to protect our children if the next pandemic should be fatal to them.*

Elina Pekkarinen states that drawings by nine-year-olds were collected in the summer of 2020, depicting how the children perceived the pandemic.

*– They drew pictures of death, hospitals, and being frightened. I think the children were more ready to talk about these themes than we adults.*

In addition to the need for new methods of listening to children, there is also a requirement to integrate the child-centred perspective into all crisis plans, for instance, regarding emergency care. The one recommendation that Elina Pekkarinen identified as most important is international collaboration, both at the Nordic and international levels.

*– Nordic and national collaboration can solve many problems, which was shown during the pandemic. I would like to see us have these structures in place for future crises as well. I believe the pandemic highlighted what it means to lose many of the services the welfare state provides for families, children, and young people. I would very much like people to stand up for the Nordic welfare state.*

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## **Johanna Fogelström-Duns, Åland.**

Johanna Fogelström-Duns says the Åland Islands felt the pandemic in several ways. The normal autonomy of the islands was restricted during the crisis, and the pandemic dealt a particularly hard blow to the Åland economy, which relies heavily on the free movement of people and goods. Furthermore, people were concerned about the health issues affecting their elderly relatives.

*– This was a significant issue for the society and government of Åland to address, and I believe they managed it exceptionally well, given our very small administration.*

All the Nordic countries have ratified the Conventions on the Rights of the Child, which carry legal obligations. Johanna Fogelström-Duns reminded the audience of Article 2 of the CRC, which states that no child should be discriminated against.

*– Yet we know that there are groups of children whose rights are not being fulfilled. We have observed that leisure, for instance, affects different groups of children in varying ways.*

Fogelström-Duns says we need to consider how we communicate and how we strengthen various groups to enhance their participation.

*– We need to address this now so that there is no form of discrimination - intentional or unintentional - in the future. We need to acknowledge that this work needs resources and provide them.*

## **4.2 Comments by youth representatives**

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### **Jonatan Lamy, President of the Swedish Federation of Student Unions**

As the Swedish ombudsperson for children, Juno Blom, was unable to attend the conference, Jonatan Lamy, President of the Swedish Federation of

Student Unions, represented Sweden instead.

*– I was one of those kids who were affected by education via computer, from 2021 until my graduation. The most striking part was the lack of social connectivity, daily routines, and structures. Two thirds of Swedish upper secondary students reported that they experienced a decline in mental health and well-being.*

Jonatan Lamy asserts that a lot relates to preparedness, as Sweden has not been at war for a long time. Most adults in Sweden have never experienced anything like the pandemic, so the preparedness was not up to standard, Lamy states.

*– I especially want to highlight one of Kirsten Sandberg's recommendations, which is about engaging youth in civil society in crisis planning. The youth civil society consists of representatives who their peers elect, and this is important because they highlight issues from their specific context. Strengthening collaboration is also vital, as daily relationships influence how effectively they will function in a crisis.*

Jonatan Lamy also wants to highlight independence. During the pandemic, there was a strong focus on health and safety, but civil society can bring their own independent focus and continue to do so during a crisis.

Lamy states that it is essential for this discussion not to be overly centred on the pandemic, but rather to focus on preparing for any future crises. Building personal relationships with policymakers is essential.

*– This is the ABC of crisis management: if you strengthen the structures now, you will have them when you need them later. We miss out on many good solutions if we do not listen to the youth. It is essential to involve young people and children in emergency planning and to ensure we follow up after the crisis.*

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**This is the ABC of crisis management: if you strengthen the structures now, you will have them when you need them later.**

-Jonatan Lamy, President of the Swedish Federation of Student Unions

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## **Boas E Høgnesen, Faroe islands**

Focusing on the importance of leisure during crises, Boas E Høgnesen noted that there was a lack of sheltered leisure spaces for children and youth during the Covid-19 pandemic.

– As a representative of Faroese children and youth, I recommend better utilisation of easily accessible natural areas. Activities such as hiking, fishing, and exploring are popular, but we need a designated place to meet before and after. Let us invest in this now so this can be put to use in a possible future crisis.

## **4.3 Conclusions, analysis and recommendations**

The right of children to be heard, as enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is more than a democratic principle. It is a fundamental human right that obligates adults to give genuine weight to children's views in all matters affecting them. This right is not symbolic — it must be operationalised in practice, especially during crises when decisions have profound impacts on children's lives.

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## **Kirsten Sandberg, Professor Emerita, the University of Oslo**

Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg, former Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, presented recommendations aimed at strengthening the implementation of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child across the Nordic region.

These recommendations were developed in collaboration with the Nordic Children's Ombudspersons and served as a central input to the conference discussions. Participants—including youth representatives—were invited to provide feedback and contribute to the finalisation of [the report Participation is protection – embedding children's rights in Nordic crisis governance](#) published at the Democracy Festival in Arendal in August 2025. It was the sixth in a series of seven publications from the project. The report builds on Sandberg's legal analysis, insights from the ombudspersons, and

contributions gathered during the conference. It offers concrete proposals for how children's right to be heard can be safeguarded in crisis governance — both nationally and through Nordic co-operation.

### **Integrate children's rights into all actions:**

Crisis legislation should explicitly incorporate children's rights, including the right to be heard and the best interests of the child. National and local action plans for crisis preparedness and response should include specific provisions for safeguarding children's rights.

Civil society organisations should be involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of child-focused crisis strategies. Intersectoral and high-level coordination of children's issues is needed. Data collection is also important; systematic reviews of the impact of crises on children are essential.

### **Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA):**

Assessment of the impact on children of any measure, before the measure is adopted. To predict the effect of a proposed policy, legislation, regulation, budget or other administrative decision affecting children. It needs to be built into Government processes at all levels and as early as possible in the development of measures.

The impact assessment should be based on input from children, civil society organisations (CSOs), experts, academic research data, and documented experiences.

### **Non-discrimination:**

Governments need to identify children in vulnerable situations, who are at risk of being marginalised, including those facing poverty, disability, or social exclusion, and provide targeted support to these children.

### **Best interests of the child:**

Ensure that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration in all actions by including them in legislation and in guidelines for preparing legislation, budgets, and policies. Additionally, provide criteria for assessing best interests. Children's views should be considered central.

### **Children's participation:**

Establish permanent, inclusive structures for children's participation at all

levels of governance, and ensure they are not forgotten in times of crisis. Provide tailored support to children with disabilities, young children, and those from marginalised communities to facilitate their participation.

Utilise digital and creative tools to facilitate participation and establish national resource centres to support child engagement. Provide ongoing training for professionals working with and on behalf of children and encourage youth involvement in community-based initiatives.

### **Right to information:**

Children have a right to information. This is closely linked to participation but is also an independent right. It is important to provide timely, age-appropriate, and accessible information in relevant languages and formats, including during crises.

### **Rights to health and education:**

School health services must be protected during crises. Ensure access to mental health and psychosocial support services for children. Establish national digital education platforms to guarantee the continuity of learning during emergencies and for children who are unable to attend school in person.

### **Strengthen Nordic co-operation on children's rights:**

Establish a Nordic framework for child rights in emergencies, which includes a joint declaration on children's rights in crisis situations, shared tools, protocols, and research, as well as a Nordic forum for exchanging promising practices. Regular dialogue between the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Ombudspersons for Children is also recommended.



## **5. Workshop presentation: How can we strengthen children's right to participation in the Nordic region and unlock better crisis management for the future?**

To acquire new knowledge and gain a youthful perspective on the proposals already presented, three workshops were held during the conference: a main workshop on youth participation in times of crisis, and two parallel workshops on empowering student councils and leisure as a resilience builder.

This part of the report focuses on the main workshop, which was divided into three themes: Being heard in a crisis, Youth as a resource, and Good examples and new ideas. Prior to the workshop, participants were introduced to the Ombudspersons' and Professor Kirsten Sandberg's recommendations, which served as a shared foundation for the discussions.

Most of the participants in the workshops were young people present at the conference, all of whom had personal experience of being young during the pandemic. What stood out most was the shared understanding that participation must be established before a crisis occurs. It cannot be improvised.

The young participants expressed a strong desire to be recognised as partners, not merely recipients of decisions made by adults. They want to be involved early, consistently, and meaningfully. The presentations from the workshops, held at the conference, were not just a summary of what was discussed, but also a message to Nordic decision makers.

## Presentation from the Main workshop

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### **Katja Brandenburg, representing The Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland & Nickolaj Oksen, representing the Danish Youth Council (DUF), Denmark**

The first theme of the main workshop was to identify which of the recommendations from the Nordic Ombudspersons and Professor Emerita Kirsten Sandberg (see chapter 4.3 in this report) should be acted on first and why.

The workshop focused on three recommendations that stood out as particularly important to the participants, starting with the one concerning the guarantee of meaningful child participation. The participants were in strong agreement that the initial step should be to establish permanent, inclusive structures for child participation at all levels of government.

*– This should be established before a crisis hits. It should be an ongoing process. Moreover, children should be involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of these processes. It is quite easy to give youth a place at the table, but ensuring they are heard is another matter, Nickolaj Oksen says.*

On the recommendation to engage civil society in crisis planning, the workshop participants agreed that the first step should be to involve civil society organisations in developing, implementing, and monitoring child-focused crisis strategies. Secondly, the workshop recommended that we must recognise civil society as key first responders and formalise their role through legislation.

*– One example of this is that the Swedish Federation of Student Unions held weekly meetings with the education department during the pandemic, says Nickolaj Oksen.*

Oksen highlighted that a lack of recognition of youth as a resource is often perceived as an issue for the individual, when in fact, it is a democratic concern. Excluding youth from crisis planning amounts to disregarding a significant portion of society in that planning process.

The workshop group also highlighted the recommendation on integrating children's rights into crisis legislation. Here, they emphasised the importance

of embedding children's rights in legal frameworks to ensure systematic consideration and structural participation during crises.

The second theme of the main workshop focused on viewing youth as a resource, emphasising how children and young people can actively contribute during a crisis and ensuring that their input is taken seriously.

*– The more youth are heard in normal life, the better involvement works during a crisis. Regular involvement fosters readiness and confidence to contribute during emergencies, Katja Brandenburg states.*

The workshop group suggested establishing digital structures to facilitate inclusive participation. The workshop group also concluded that schools should be regarded as a resource.

*– Schools are ideal for youth engagement, as they are already a significant part of children's daily lives. When empowered, student councils allow youth to take responsibility and participate in decision-making. Schools can also serve as a democratic platform where decision-making skills are developed and local level participation is strengthened, Nickolaj Oksen says.*

Regarding the third theme of the main workshop, Good practice and new ideas, the group emphasised that access to information and education is vital. Children should receive accessible and age-appropriate information and be encouraged to participate on their terms.

*– When children receive a proper education, they develop the necessary confidence to be taken seriously by adults. Training and education for adults is also essential for those working with children to become competent listeners, Katja Brandenburg says.*

The group was also tasked with designing a Youth Crisis Response team. They envisioned a broad team operating at local, regional, national, and international levels of society.

*– The team should include student representatives from school councils and youth organisations, civil society and NGOs, community organisations, public administration, local government, education, health, and emergency services, Nickolaj Oksen says.*

Another vision of a Youth Crisis Response team involved two parallel groups: one comprising youth and children, and the other comprising adults. This structure would allow young people to express themselves independently while still fostering collaboration.

*– A key emphasis must be placed on training adults to learn how to interact with children and young people in respectful and inclusive ways, Oksen concludes.*

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**It is quite easy to give youth a place at the table, but ensuring they are heard is another matter.**

– Nickolaj Oksen

## **Presentation from the workshop on empowering student councils**

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**Agla Bjork Kristjansdottir, representing the Ombudsman for the children, Iceland & Ailita Volkova, representing Jaunatne smaidam, a youth organisation in Latvia**

The workshop group states that student councils must be open and accessible to all students by maintaining a welcoming environment. Accessibility should be viewed from both a social and physical standpoint.

*– It is essential that student councils are accessible to all students, not just the most popular ones. For example, this means ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to engage within the council, Agla Bjork says.*

Additionally, educating students about the responsibilities and functions of the council, while encouraging and teaching them how to contribute, will foster greater involvement, the workshop group states. The group also emphasised the importance of inclusive and balanced representation in student councils and fostering a culture of inclusivity. The importance of meaningful tasks and real responsibility was also highlighted.

*– Working on a meaningful issue helps students build critical thinking,*

*collaboration and develop leadership skills. When the council works on issues that they care deeply about, the outcomes are more impactful and aligned with the students' actual needs, Ailita Volkova says.*

## **Presentation from the workshop on leisure as a resilience builder**

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**Rota Lāce, representing the NGO Creative Minds for Culture in Latvia & Elias Fjellander, representing the National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations (LSU) in Sweden**

The workshop group concluded that, during crises, ensuring meaningful leisure activities for young people is crucial for their well-being.

Preparedness can help make leisure activities available in times of crisis, and the group especially highlighted the need for contingency planning within the leisure sector. Regarding policy development, the group emphasised the need to support a rapid start-up and compensation phase for leisure activities in the event of a crisis.

*– This means re-engaging young people socially without delay and utilising detached youth workers to forge connections to social activities, Elias Fjellander says.*

Regarding structures for coordination, the group deemed meaningful youth inclusion structures to be very important, along with the resourcing of sector-specific organisations to provide support to the leisure sector during times of crisis.

*– In terms of communication, we observed a range of positive and negative aspects that occurred during the Covid crisis. Building trust with parents and caregivers and providing youth-friendly information about the crisis is essential. In a crisis, there is a wealth of information, and it can be challenging for young people to discern which information is intended for them. Peer-to-peer information is vital, Rota Lāce says.*

Finally, the workshop group emphasised the need for resources to support the leisure sector in making adaptations during a crisis, as well as to provide safe leisure spaces for young people.



## 6. Strengthening Nordic co-operation on children's rights – a timely opportunity

The timing of this project and its forthcoming report could not be more relevant. As the Nordic region undertakes a revision of the Helsinki Agreement – a foundational document for regional co-operation – there is a unique opportunity to ensure that children's rights are systematically embedded in future governance structures.

The original agreement from 1962 did not mention children and young people. Today, proposals under consideration aim to formally recognise the Nordic Youth Council, anchor youth participation in the Nordic welfare model, and establish children's rights as a dedicated theme within Nordic co-operation.

These developments align closely with the new report [Participation is protection – embedding children's rights in Nordic crisis governance](#). Informed by youth input and expert analysis, the report offers concrete recommendations for how children's right to be heard can be safeguarded – particularly in times of crisis.

By linking the insights from this project with the revision of the Helsinki Agreement, Nordic co-operation has a timely opportunity to take a decisive step forward. Embedding children's rights is not only a legal and moral obligation – it is a strategic investment in more inclusive, resilient, and democratic societies.

# About the publication

## The right of children and young people to be heard, seen, and involved in the Nordic region

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