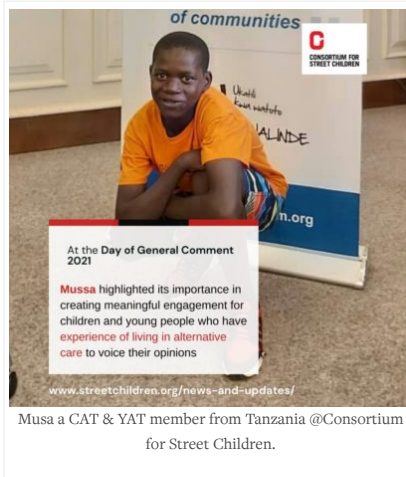




# What does child participation and inclusion look like?

Victoria Olarte, Senior Strategic Research Partner at Hope and Homes for Children and working with Changing the Story (CTS), explores what child participation and inclusion looked like when the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion on Children's Rights and Alternative Care was held virtually for the first time.



Inclusion of children and young people in the policies and practices which relate to them is a critical foundation for the delivery of human rights. Yet across the globe, we see repeated and widespread failure to consult and involve children around their own care. Having spent the past 15 years working with governments and NGOs to build pathways for the care and protection of children, I know all too well that children and young people are too often left out of the debate. Our work with CTS has been about changing the terms of this debate.

Hope and Homes for Children is at the forefront of a growing global movement to eliminate the institutional care of children. Recently, we were one of the core group of civil society organisations supporting and facilitating the 2021 UNCRC Day of General Discussion (DGD) focused on Children's Rights and Alternative Care. Together with our partners in the Changing the Story research team, in which we are exploring issues of youth accountability and disability inclusion as it relates to vulnerable children who are in care or at risk of family separation, we

have also been closely following and contributing to the DGD. What was remarkable about this year's DGD was the participation of children in planning, informing, and delivering this important debate.

Every two years, the Committee on the Rights of the Child – the body of independent experts responsible for reviewing progress made by States parties in implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – holds an open discussion to foster a deeper understanding of the contents and implications of the UNCRC. Whilst the Convention protects the physical and health rights of children and youth, it also emphasises their rights as independent beings who are individuals, who should be listened to and, most importantly, taken seriously. It is only right, then, that the processes of the Committee uphold children's right to participation. When the global Covid-19 pandemic forced the postponement of this important global debate on alternative care, and it was shifted online, the Committee, civil society and children and young people took up the challenge to deepen the opportunity for participation, inclusion and accountability.

The preparation of the DGD clearly prioritised participation and practical mechanisms for inclusion. From the very outset, it explicitly aimed to create meaningful engagement for children and young people who have experience of the child protection system and/or of living in alternative care of any type. The aim here was to support children and young people to be able to voice their opinions on what constitutes quality care and advocate for legislative and systemic changes.

Children and Young People's Advisory Teams (CAT and YAT) were established through an open application system, with 25 members located across 18 countries, representing all forms of alternative care and with a wide range of abilities. These children and young people seized the opportunity to mobilise their peers, share their experience and develop nuanced, evidence-based contributions to shape and deliver the DGD. They dedicated immense energy, integrity and time to doing so.

In the lead up to the DGD, the research team called for greater accountability to children and fundamental shifts in inclusion for children with disabilities in family and community-based care. We highlighted the huge gaps between policy and practice which results in many children with disabilities being committed to institutions and residential 'special schools' and challenges to inclusion such as inability to

access sign language interpretation, meaning deaf children are not included in decision making about their own care. Evidence from our work with Changing the Story was one of over 200 written and video submissions from children and young people, governments, national human rights institutions, inter-governmental organisations and UN agencies, civil society organisations, academics and coalitions – a snapshot of which is captured on video from the perspective of children, families and practitioners. This really is a significant body of lived experience, learning and evidence informing the global discourse on alternative care.

A major global survey also elicited views and recommendations from over 1,000 children and young people aged five to 25 years old from across the world. The research was led by a research team involving 10 members of the CAT and YAT who co-designed the methodology, supported the analysis of the findings, and shaped the Make our Voices Count report and the child-friendly version. Representatives of this group also presented the research results at the DGD, as well as at several other international and national events after the DGD.

“Although every child and young person has their own unique story, we have been struck by just how many of us have similar experiences of alternative care around the world. A lot of these experiences are negatively impacting our human rights; drastic change is needed.”

(Make our Voices Count, 2021.)

Participation of children and young people was highly visible through the two-day meeting. Usually convened in Geneva, this year the event was held virtually for the first time, with more than 500 people dialling in from over 125 countries. There was a sense of democratisation, with the doors to the Committee open more widely so that those with a stake in children’s care could come in. It was striking to attend a global event which prioritized as speakers and experts the children, young people, and adults with lived experiences of care and protection systems. Children and young people spoke on every panel and eloquently illuminated the experiences and demands of their peers. Captioning and sign language interpretation accompanied every session, shifting the needle toward inclusive communication- an innovation stimulated by our work with Changing the Story.

The participation of children in issues that affect their lives remains a major stumbling block to the realisation of children’s rights. What is clear is that many courageous children and young people have spoken up through the DGD process and they are orienting global institutions, national governments and other decision makers on the way forward on children’s rights and alternative care. It is our responsibility to listen. The outcomes of the DGD remain to be seen, and will be critical in determining the true extent of accountability to children. Were their voices truly heard, and what difference does it make?

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