

# Participation of Children in Decision Making and Urban Planning in Local Communities: Employing Solar Energy in the Serbian Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Children and young people are rarely recognized as active and important participants in community development. Urban planners and designers who are involved in planning, developing and designing places usually follow standard procedures which assume the involvement and participation of the governmental representatives, different stakeholders, experts from different fields or the representatives of NGOs and civil society. Children and young people are not recognized as a group with specific aspirations, views, needs or understanding of space. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child speaks about that, recognizes the need for change and recommends the active involvement of children in different areas and decisions. This should be applied to the urban planning and decisions that are being made in planning and development.

The situation in Serbia is not much different from what is going on in other countries. However, there are already the first signs of the changing practice; a shift toward broadening the number of participants whose opinion matter and who should be included in the planning process is taking place. Thus, there is also a growing notion of how important it would be to include children as well, listen to them and work with them.

At the moment, several projects have been designed and developed along these lines where children have been one of the main actors. This paper will explore and present one of them—example from the Food and Catering school in Čačak—which have been developed as part of the national project on energy efficiency and use of the renewable energy sources in schools throughout Serbia. In this case, children were actively involved throughout the whole process, which was also used as part of their education on energy, renewable energy resources, the importance of energy question in the everyday life, and sustainability. Throughout the process, they had regular meetings with the local governments, which provided opportunity to talk about issues relevant for their community and its development.

This experience has many messages for planners and all those who are involved in community planning and development. In the paper, some of the messages will be outlined.

**KEYWORDS:** Children participation, Urban planning, Green energy

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Trying to respond to current environmental issues, occurred under the influence of global changes, Serbia has directed its development policy towards sustainable principles. By adopting the National Sustainable Development Strategy, Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2021 and number of supporting documents, the objectives for further economic, social and ecological objectives have been created.

Successful implementation of the objectives set out in the new strategies, requires changes within the institutions as well as series of changes in the behavior of both, the society and every individual. One of those changes is the attitude towards children and youth as well as the appreciation of their opinion within families, schools and local community. Children are great connoisseurs of the environment they live in, along with their own needs in that particular surrounding. (Chawla, 2002) By participating at decision-making and sustainable urban planning in a local community, the children are acquiring the civic skills, comprehending the importance of the long-term environment preservation. They become aware of the global changes and the possibility to adjust and mitigate the negative impacts. Moreover, children and young people offer a number of problem solving creative ideas and suggestions. As the youngest social group, they will enjoy for quite some time in the environmental quality, having the opportunity to achieve their long-term plans. Children represent the bridge with the future. (Chawla, 2002)

The awareness on the importance of informing and including children and youth, has led to their inclusion into the international policies for sustainable development. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992 within its final document, Agenda 21, the children were recognized as the important group that has to be involved into the strategies on sustainable development. On the Second United Nation Conference on Human Settlements held in 1996, it was concluded that the needs of children and youth, particularly the ones dealing with the environment, have to be fully addressed. (Chwala & Heft, 2002)

In order to enhance successful participation of children when dealing with the environmental issues at the local community level, strong state support is indispensable – introduction of the legislative, policy and practice that ensure that the children’s rights on participation are enabled and achieved, taken seriously in all decisions regarding children i.e. that in any way affect their life. Solid legal framework represents a pre-condition for achieving and protecting the children’s rights. (Lansdown, 2010)

## **2 LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN SERBIA**

For the first time in international legislation, the attitude towards children was changed by adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, held in 1989. The children were granted their rights, meaning that their voice was getting heard and their opinions validated. It implies that the parents do not take all the decisions on behalf of a child only by themselves. The children’s right to participate was mainly defined in the Article 12 within the Convention on children’s rights.<sup>1</sup> According to this article, it is indispensable that “the children, capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (UNICEF, 1989). Based on the Article 12 the State is required to provide the children access to this right. The Article 13 is an integrated part of the right on participation as it speaks about the freedom of expression and sharing information (UNICEF, 1989).

In 1990, Serbia i.e. former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, ratified the Convention on the Rights of the child with the Law on ratification of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (official journal of FRY – International agreement, no. 15/90 and official journal of FRY – International agreement, no. 4/96 and 2/97). According to the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, the immediate implementation of human rights ratified by international treaties and laws is guaranteed. However, although the ratified international treaties have been immediately applied as having the legal force right after the Constitution, the application of the international treaties in practice is not self-executing. (Petrović, et al., 2013) Therefore, it is necessary to harmonize existing laws and passing the new ones.

In the past several years, Serbia has been very active in the field of legislation, but according to the reports issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the legislation is still not completely in line

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term child is related to all the persons below the age of 18, adopted in accordance with the Convention on the Right of the Child and the Draft Plan on the Right of the Child

with the Convention on the Rights of the Child whereas there is no comprehensive law on the rights of the child (Petrović, et al., 2013). Current laws mainly recognize the general principles of the Convention - the right to life, survival and development as well as the best interests of a child.

The starting point for the children's rights enhancement in Serbia is the National Action Plan for Children, adopted in 2004 which contains the guidelines, essential for improving the position of a child i.e. defines development course in certain areas. So far, this plan has been closest to the National Strategy. The adoption of the National Action Plan for Children was the basis for the adoption of local action plans - plans at a municipal level.

When it comes to the participation of children in decision-making at schools or local community, significant results haven't been made. First of all, there is a problem in participation of citizens in Serbia. In the country without transparency in the process and access to the information, citizens' institutions and the practice of consultative democratic processes in history, it is very difficult to create mechanisms for effective participation (Lansdown, 2010). Thus, for example, in the Law on Planning and Construction (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 72/2009, 81/2009, 64/2010, 24/2011), the participation is only required in the form of public insight, which is not in accordance with the changes that occur in the planning and collaborative model that is being increasingly used in informal processes in Serbia.

The issues related to children's participation are even more complex. The child's participation in decision-making in family surrounding, educational processes as well as in a community, is neither regulated by the law or sufficiently emphasized and adequately supported (Petrović, et al., 2013). All the laws regarding children are assumed to be applicable to the children but are not defined. When speaking about the children, it has to be clearly emphasized how the laws will be applied.

Regulating the legislative framework is the basis for successful participation of the children, but at the same time represents the beginning. However, the inclusion of children in decision-making and planning processes at the local and regional levels is followed by a number of institutional, social and cultural challenges.

### **3 PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN SERBIA – SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES**

During last several years, the series of attempts to involve children in decision-making processes at the local levels have been noted in Serbia. With emerging initiatives, the participation has started to move slowly towards institutionalization. The institutionalization of the participation is essential for the success of the implementation, but on the other hand, can be very dangerous and harmful if not performed properly. Children are often expected to fit into the participation rules defined for adults, to possess the same knowledge and supremacy, which neglects their specificity and uniqueness. This creates a risk of losing the most precious traits the children possess - spontaneity, creativity and unique approach to problems (Malone&Hartung, 2010).

The process of institutionalization of children's involvement in planning and decision-making at the local level in Serbia is followed by a number of challenges that need to be spotted and understand on time so as the process could be successful and a part of routine practice (Bartlett, 2002). The first are the constraints and opportunities related to citizens' participation and only then, those that are specific for children. The paragraphs that follow will present the challenges solely relating to the participation of children as a particular social group.

#### **3.1 The traditional attitude towards children**

The traditional attitude towards children is distinctive for great number of countries in transition (Lansdown, 2010). Children are not regarded as equal citizens who have their own rights and opinions which are of the same importance as the ones of the adults.

The adults enjoy in watching the children and being in their presence, but fail at hearing them and understanding their needs and wishes (Chawla, 2002). There is a strong cultural belief in Serbia that the adults know what is “good” for their children. They determine their schedule, the amount of free time, often without a slightest chance that children could influence those decisions. They usually don’t try to hear them and understand their opinions, to take them seriously and take their opinion into consideration. (MODS, n.d)

### **3.2 Lack of information and interest among the children to participate**

Very often, children show lack of interest to participate either at school or in a local community. According to the survey conveyed by the Coalition of Children and Youth who gathered at the Center for the Rights of the Child in 2007, it was concluded that the children were very interested in participating in the family issues. In Serbia, children currently are not interested in any other fields, being hardly concerned about the state and world politics. Less than a third of the surveyed minors showed any interest in decision-making on local, national and global issues, including school (Stevanovic, 2008).

One of the reasons is that they do not know what the right to participate includes. Children are not aware that they can decide how their rooms will be painted, where they will go on an excursion, how their park will look like or that they could participate in designing of programs for young people in the city, budget allocation, etc. Generally speaking, there is very low awareness on possibilities of participation - children are not involved in decision-making within the family, school or community, which is a product of the traditional way of parenting, which often considers the participation as negative asset that eventually results in creating individuals who are not responsible for their decisions (MODS, n.d.).

### **3.3 Lack of understanding related to the changes in the childhood structure**

During the trainings of adults to work with children, the techniques in which the adults’ recall their childhoods are frequently used so as they could better understand the children. Rodger Hart has noted that when adults evoke memories of their childhood in their communication with children, they are able to establish closer contact with them (Gillespie, 2013). However, it shouldn’t be neglected that their views, even if adults are trying to put themselves in the position of a child, are very different from what a child who lives in the present time, wants and wishes.

It is important to understand the change in the culture of a childhood. The adults tend to believe that the children like nature, open spaces, rural environment. However, the childhood is much more structural nowadays. Children spend less time outdoors and much more in enclosed spaces such as after school care, various schools, and playrooms, in organized sport or artistic activities. Childhood increasingly resembles an adult life whilst children are losing control over their daily activities and free time (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002). The unstructured childhood model, which requires much greater involvement of parents spending a lot of organized time with their children, is today much less common in Serbia. Yet this model is significantly different from any childhood an adult might recall.

These changes in a childhood structure have highly reflected on the participation. A child's life is much more institutionalized so as participation. It requires that parents, school representatives and local communities adjust their approaches to the current needs of children (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002).

### **3.4 Inadequate participation environment**

Children represent specific social group. Stimulating environment is essential for their participation. Children possess rich imagination and different approaches in problem solving when compared with adults. When collaborating with them, it is necessary to recognize the values of their experience and their own views of life. The environment which enables them to feel taken seriously and understood by the adults should be created.

Children need to understand the objectives, strategies and restrictions of projects, they are involved into. They should always feel free to leave or join the project without any consequences. The transparency

of the process is very important as well as consulting the children through all the phases of the project, during which, children have to be aware of what they are doing and why. Children's interpretation of events may increase the perception of the project objective and its opportunities among the adults (Chawla, 2002).

The participation of children requires adequate measures of protection. Promoting the participation, without considering the potential risks and problems the children might face with, such as the exposure to the media, punishing or neglecting by an employer or a parent, leaves children unprotected and brings them into even more complex and vulnerable position. (Lansdown, 2001)

### **3.5 Adults' incompetence when working with children**

If children's opinion is taken seriously, the ability of adults to collaborate and involve them in decision-making is yet to be determined. The acknowledgement that children have rights does not mean that parents no longer have responsibility for them. Opposite to that, children cannot be left alone to fight for their rights only by themselves. Adults are required to provide it to them (Lansdown, 2001).

The backbone of the communicational problems lies in the fact that most of disciplines related to the children participation are based on theories which aren't children oriented such as a number of theories regarding planning and decision-making in the local community which are usually only modified to be used when working with children (Malone & Hartung, 2010). The representatives of local administrations haven't been trained to work with children and are often aware of their shortcomings.

Sometimes, even when they pay attention to what the children are saying and thinking, adults are unable to understand and make use of it, as not being expressed in the way they are accustomed to, ie.in the way which they could make useful. The children express themselves in various forms, usually in the ways the adults least expect. Therefore, it is very important to train the adults so they could work with children and establish meaningful and encouraging communication with them in order to channel their opinions adequately during decision-making processes at the Local Administration. Adults need to work closely with children to help them express their views and understand their own lives (Gillespie, 2013).

## **4 EVALUATION OF THE CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION**

As already mentioned in the previous segment, throughout the past two decades, a number of initiatives have been launched in Serbia along with various experimental attempts, aiming at children inclusion in decision-making within a local community.

However, according to the survey carried out by The Civil Society Networks for Children Serbia (MODS), coordinated by the Association for Development of Children and Youth – The Open Club from Nis and conducted in partnership with UNICEF, in which high school students and the representatives of local communities in twenty municipalities of Serbia were surveyed, it was concluded that in reality, the children are included in participation at the very low extent at both, schools and local administration. Even 78.8% of children surveyed claimed that they had never attended the meeting with the municipality representatives whereas 85.6% of them had never been involved in decision-making with the authorities. On the other hand, 97.1% of the local community representatives believe that young people have the opportunity to influence decisions. This discrepancy in opinions indicates the problem in communication between children and adults, the traditional attitude of adults towards children, as well as the presence of participation form, i.e. "non-participation" that represent only the illusion related to the inclusion in addition to the artificially presented participation (MODS, n.d.).

Such results indicate that continuous evaluation of participation is rather necessary in order to assess the accomplishments and point out its shortcomings. In literature, there are several models for the evaluation of participation. Based on the findings of the accessible participation examples in a local community and planning, one of the contemporary methods of evaluation is the division made by Marc Francis and Ray Lorenzo. They identified seven levels of participation within which, the majority of

projects can be classified from the romantic to the proactive participation. Each of them depicts different positions and roles of children in the process of participation (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002). This ladder is rather widespread and contemporary, but does not take into consideration the forms of "non-participation", turned out to be common in Serbia.

The most common and widely used is Roger Hart's model, known as the "ladder of participation", which contains the forms of "non-participation" but at the same time offers the possibility of widespread use due to its simplicity (Hart, 1992). This model will be used for the purposes of this study.

The model is consisted of eight ladders that vary by type of interaction, achieved between children and adults during participation. The first three levels of the ladder represent a form of "non-participation": manipulation, decoration and tokenism. According to Hart, the following conditions have to be met to even talk about participation:

1. Children need to understand the goals and objectives of the project;
2. They need to know who involved them in the project and for what reason;
3. They must have a substantial, not only "decorative" role;
4. Children can volunteer in the project only if they understand it well (Hart, 1992)

Upper five degrees of the ladder represent the models of participation, from the lowest, in which children are involved in a project whilst rules are defined by adults, to those initiated by the children who share decisions with adults. According to Hart, participation shouldn't be always performed at the highest ladder but it is useful that all levels of ladder are represented as needed (Hart, 1992).

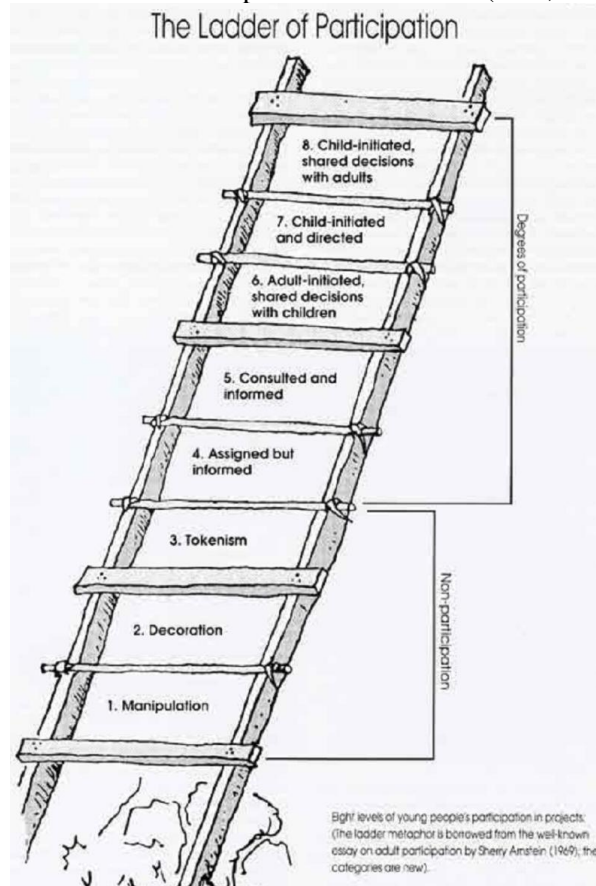


Figure 1: Hart's ladder of participation (Source: Hart, 1992)

Hart's ladder is most commonly used but also most criticized. Some scientists believe that Hart did not establish logical hierarchy of the ladder. (Treseder, 1997). Hart, in his later works, also asserts that the ladder was only basis for his further researches, as being partly limited since had been created based on the results generated only from researches that were carried out in the United States (Malone & Hartung, 2010).

According to Karen Malone and Catherine Hartung, recognition of these limitations led to the creation of a series of new typologies, representing a variation, but did not lead to substantial changes that would create the new framework related to the participation of children. Two major shortcomings of this model: changes in communication with children in relation to the time when the ladder was created as well as breakdown of participation into segments have not been resolved in any of new attempts yet (Malone & Hartung, 2010).

## **5 PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY IN SERBIA THROUGH THE TOPICS RELATED TO ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION**

One of the simplest approaches for children to get involved into decision-making and planning in local communities are topics related to environment protection, encompassing current problems such as climate change or lack of resources (Strazdins & Skeat, 2011). Scientists agree that the late childhood, i.e. early adolescence is the time when the interests about global issues are being formed. However, one should be very cautious as studying about global issues can cause feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and anxiety. (Chawla & Flanders Cushing, 2007) Under the influence of media, the children at that age have already been presented the apocalyptic images on climate changes which negatively affect their critical thinking on this matter. Therefore, one of best solution would be offering them confidence and optimism, possible alternatives for problem solving i.e. downgrading the problem. When a person takes such problems seriously, considering it with positive and optimistic stand, it can be motivational strength for taking part in various activities dealing with environment protection, we all live in (Ojala, 2012).

In recent years, there has been a trend in Serbia that the children are getting informed at schools about the importance of utilizing the sustainable energy sources and energy saving, through models based on learning through experience. There have been some good practices related to information sharing between the children and Local Administration Representatives. Solar panels and collectors are placed on the school roofs whereas the children are included into measuring and following up of these systems while also working on their improvement. Some schools went a step forward by including their children into decision making at a local community level through meetings with Local Administration representatives. In the following section, the example on Food and Catering school from Čačak will be presented.

### **5.1 Food and Catering school in Čačak – roof solar panels**

The pilot project that included installing of solar panels on one school roof and two kindergartens has been implemented to examine the feasibility of investing in solar energy in given climate and socio-economic conditions within the contemporary concept of energy development of the Cacak municipality.

This project was implemented in 2010, within the Hellenic Aid program, in cooperation with the CRES - Centre for Renewable Energy Sources in Greece as the project holder, ECONET, NGOs, expert networks as the partners on the project as well as with the municipality of Čačak (Mitrovic, 2010).





Figure 2: Solar system of High School of Food and Hospitality in Cacak, Serbia (Dragičević, Plazinić, & Jovanović, 2011)

The project consists of two parts. The first part encompasses the installation of solar panels for the purpose of using alternative energy sources in the city of Čačak. The first installation was set up in the Food and Catering School, being consisted of 40 m<sup>2</sup> highly selective flat plate collectors that heat up to 2 m<sup>3</sup> of sanitary water per day. (Dragicevic, et al., 2011) The entire assembly is controlled automatically which, in addition to the controlling function, has a measuring role as well. There are two devices set up on the system, one for measuring the consumption of sanitary water and another one, used for measuring the amount of thermal energy produced by the system (Mitrovic, 2010).

The second part of the project was related to inspecting the installation efficiency, possibilities for students' inclusion and opportunities for promoting of this energy form. The intensive monitoring of the system is performed by a group, consisted of 12 school students. The students are divided into five groups, with each group responsible on a daily basis for monitoring and noting down the data concerning the system, in already prepared charts. At regular meetings held with school staff and City Administration representatives, the students maintain continuous education on renewable energy, planning new experiments in the field of energy efficiency (Mitrovic, 2010). It is planned that the measuring will be continued over a longer period of time after the project has been completed, in order to achieve reproducible results and include greater number of students- future promoters (Mitrovic, 2010).

## 5.2 The positive impacts of the project

Inclusion of children, described in the project, has brought numerous benefits to both, the children and the local community. Although, one can often come across the argument against participation, stating that the children are incompetent to participate due to their age, inexperienced or deprived of their childhood by being given the right to participate, the positive impacts the inclusion of children brings, are far more important (Lansdown, 2010).

Involving students in measuring and monitoring the sustainable energy systems and their cooperation with the local community have had numerous benefits for children:

1. **Personal and individual progress of students involved.** They have acquired knowledge on sustainable energy sources and global issues not only through their own work and experience but also in discussions with adults, who are providing them with new information, helpful to get a better grasp of these topics.

2. **Learning the civic participation skills.** Children begin to understand their role as citizens only through practice. One cannot expect that these skills would appear when children become adults, but they have to be worked on from the early childhood. By including children from the early childhood in



the work of a local community, they are gradually learning to become responsible in accordance with their abilities and knowledge. They develop their skills as citizens who will, one day, influence the decisions, made at a local community or the country level, in the field of spatial and urban planning, or in any other field. (Knowles-Yanez, 2005)

**3. Acquiring new knowledge through communication with adults.** Although children need to develop their own ideas, it is very important to consult and exchange their views with adults, in order to resolve some of their concerns and work towards common goals (Chawla & Heft, 2002).

By developing their capacities, children influence the development of local communities. A number of positive effects have been noted down in the community:

**1. Dissemination and promotion of positive practices in the community.** Students become promoters of development – they transmit the ideas to their environment, spread their knowledge among the family members and peer groups, thus this example has very quickly aroused the interest of other schools (Technical School in Cacak installed a small solar power plant in 2012).

**2. Setting up the creative environment for decision-making.** Children have creative thinking, often have ideas "outside the box" whereas their ways of problem solving are often innovative. Moreover, they approach the problems very seriously, and therefore bring their energy, knowledge and spontaneity in communication, which is of great benefit to the local community.

**3. Raising the awareness of children's rights.** With such projects, children remind adults on their rights and show how great their abilities are. This approach creates new arenas in which the local community development may go to (Chawla, 2002).

## 6 CONCLUSION

This research shows how the project related to children inclusion in decision-making at both school and local community level, was designed through topics pertaining to the environment. According to Hart's ladder, this form of participation can be found on the fifth or sixth ladder, depending on the extent at which the contribution of children's participation would be included in decision-making. It implies the participation of children, initiated by adults which starts from the participation when the children are getting informed and consulted, up to the one, when the decisions are being taken jointly with the children.

Nevertheless, in order to determine the project impact, another study is necessary as it would reveal to what extent this idea has been implemented. If the project is not implemented as planned, the practice might show completely different results on the Hart's ladder, such as the researches on participation of children in Serbia, where it was concluded that the dominant form is children manipulation.

In Serbia, politicians often mention children in their campaigns, which most often represents a form of decoration. They usually speak about them as potentials for the future whilst their rights are rarely taken into account. They do not represent the group of interest for politicians, since not being part of the electorate.

Though we are talking about children and setting up of long-term objectives, children and their organizations have to be particularly addressed in present as if their requests and wishes are not taken seriously on time, the consequences will be far greater. If the current children's needs are not met, the price will get much higher eventually. In order to become "potential for future", children should be given enough time and attention as well as the opportunity to meet their basic needs. (Chawla, 2002)

Improvement of children's rights, including participation, requires serious government stand when dealing with children, provided mechanisms for children's voices to be heard and respected, but also the

continuous cooperation between children, the adults in charge of working with children, parents and the local administration representatives.

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