

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Taking Stock after 25 Years and Looking Ahead

Edited by

Ton Liefwaard
Julia Sloth-Nielsen



BRILL
NIJHOFF

LEIDEN | BOSTON

To be Heard and Seen: Youth Participation as a Goal and as a Means to Improve Children's Rights Situations

Karin Kloosterboer

Abstract

This chapter describes the potency of the relatively young CRC and the power of the right to participation. It argues that contemporary research into children's rights situations not only cannot do without the affected children's input but is considerably enhanced in its impact with children's participation; indeed, with the proper organisation, children can become a direct part of efforts towards improving these situations. Children's participation can be a means as well as an end. Two children's rights studies are presented as examples. The first was performed in Dutch asylum-seeker centres and the second in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The chapter discusses the CRC, examines the studies, the children's participation in them and the follow-up process, and offers some concluding observations.

1 Introduction

'You are the first person to ever ask us something' – girl, 11 years old, asylum seekers' centre, the Netherlands.

This chapter describes the potency of the 25-year-old UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).¹ The CRC can serve as a goal and as a means to improve children's rights situations. The rights that guarantee a form of participation to children play a crucial role in realising these improvements. In particular, then, the chapter explores the power of the right to participation. It argues that contemporary research into children's rights situations not only cannot do without the affected children's input but is considerably enhanced in its impact if they participate in it; indeed, with the proper organisation, children can become a direct part of efforts towards improving these situations.

1 International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

When the Convention was first drawn up, the idea that children are legal subjects invested with rights, rather than just objects of care, was progressive. It remains a highly relevant notion, but the fact that children's participation² can be a means as well as an end was perhaps not fully understood in 1989.

Two children's rights studies are presented as examples. The first study was performed in Dutch asylum-seeker centres,³ the second in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.⁴ In its examination of these studies, this chapter comprises five sections: a discussion of the CRC; of the studies; of children's participation in them; of follow-up to the studies; and concluding observations.

2 The Convention on the Rights of the Child

The celebration of 25 years of the CRC on 20 November 2014 was an occasion to reflect on this robust instrument for improving children's daily living conditions. It is a tool that is and can be used in various ways, and one that grows stronger the more its potential is explored and understood.

2.1 *Minimum Standards*

The standards in the CRC concern minimum standards, or the lowest thresholds that a children's rights situation should meet in states that have ratified the Convention. A prosperous country such as the Netherlands may go further and is encouraged to do so. If other provisions exist that are more favourable to children, then these take precedence.⁵ The Convention has various important functions. For example, it is (obviously) a legal instrument. It additionally provides pedagogical instruction to all who have children or work with or for them.

2 In line with the terminology of the CRC, this chapter uses the term 'children' to refer to all young people up to 18 years of age, and hence it includes adolescents.

3 Kloosterboer K *Kind in het centrum. Kinderrechten in asielzoekerscentra* (2009). Summary in English: *Child in the Centre: Children's rights in Asylum-Seeker Centres*.

4 Kloosterboer K *Kind op Bonaire [Child on Bonaire]. Kinderrechten in Caribisch Nederland [Children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands]* (2013). Kloosterboer K *Kind op Sint Eustatius [Child on St. Eustatius]. Kinderrechten in Caribisch Nederland [Children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands]* (2013). Kloosterboer K *Kind op Saba [Child on Saba]. Kinderrechten in Caribisch Nederland [Children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands]* (2013).

5 Article 41 of the CRC stipulates that the provisions most favourable to the child take precedence.

The Convention, moreover, acts as a foundation for youth policy, that is, for governmental policy for children.⁶ The latter is also apparent from the Convention itself, which contains many provisions that directly refer to the government's responsibility with the phrase, 'the State Parties shall ...' In its explanation of the Convention, the Committee on the Rights of the Child states that the goal of the Convention and the formulation of its article 4 require states to provide for legislation that accords with the CRC. This legislation, furthermore, must be implemented and enforced in actuality. To effect the rights for certain groups of people, it may be necessary to implement specific measures aimed at, for example, addressing certain arrears.⁷

2.2 *Four Basic Principles*

The Convention sets out four basic principles:

- All rights apply to all children: non-discrimination (article 2).
- In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (article 3).
- Right to life and development (article 6).
- Respect for the child's opinion: participation (article 12).

These four principles form the foundation of the Convention and must always be considered in explaining and applying the other Convention articles. The Convention is also referred to as 'holistic': it forms a coherent whole of inter-related provisions that together bear upon children's situations and provide minimum standards.

2.3 *Right to Participation*

One of the four pillars or basic principles of the Convention is the right to participation. Article 12 states that children must be afforded the opportunity to form and express their own views in all matters that affect them. Their views must be given 'due weight' in accordance with their age and maturity. States must 'assure' them this right. The Convention is very clear about children and their right to participation: we should not talk *about* children (as an object of care) but *to* them. Children are legal subjects invested with rights and must be able to participate in and contribute to society. They must be given

6 Compare Blaak M et al., *Handboek Internationaal Jeugdrecht* (2012).

7 Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 5 on general measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2003) CRC/GC/2003/5.

opportunity to do so in a way that is appropriate to their age and level of development. Children are the primary source of insight into their own situation.

The right to participation comprises several aspects, such as listening to children, informing them, involving them in decisions and taking their views seriously. They must also be protected against harmful information. Article 12 cannot be viewed separately from the other children's rights formulated in the Convention. For every right – whether it pertains to safety, health, education or religion – the exercise thereof must take account of the child's right to be heard and to be taken seriously. With regard to article 3, it seems almost inconceivable to determine what is in a specific child's best interest, without drawing on that child's own view and opinion on the matter.⁸ In the case of article 6 (the right to life and development), the link is equally clear. Children can only develop optimally if they can express themselves, voice their opinion and learn that they are taken seriously.

Article 12 must be considered in conjunction with the other Convention provisions relating to participation,⁹ such as the right to freedom of expression in article 13; the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in article 14; the freedom of association in article 15; and the right to information in article 17.

2.4 *Participation and Empowerment*

Depending on the time period, society and culture, the concept of children's participation can be understood in different ways.¹⁰ One of the ways to understand youth participation is as empowerment: strengthening their socio-economic situation and social safety.

8 See also Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 14 on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (art. 3, para 1) (2013) CRC/C/GC/14.

9 The original text of the proposal for a Children's Rights Convention, ten years before the final convention text, did not contain a provision as set out in article 12. The right to participation materialised (increasingly) in the course of designing the convention. See Detrick S *A Commentary on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1999); and Blaak M et al., *Handboek Internationaal Jeugdrecht* (2012).

10 In 1992 Roger Hart presented the 'Participation ladder' with eight levels (Hart RA *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* (1992)). These eight levels are: manipulation; decoration; tokenism (non-participation); young people assigned and informed; young people consulted and informed; adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people; young people lead and initiate action; young people and adults share decision-making.

2.5 *The Committee on the Rights of the Child on Participation*

The UN Children's Rights Committee in Geneva sees article 12 – listening to the child's opinion and taking this seriously – as an essential condition to achieving the implementation of the Convention.¹¹ The Committee published an explanation of article 12 in 2009.¹² In this document, the Committee emphasises that participation is an ongoing process in which information must be exchanged to create a permanent dialogue between children and adults. Every child must be given an opportunity to participate in this dialogue.

It is notable that the Committee also addresses the age at which children should be able to participate. It does not see biological age as the decisive factor in determining if a child is capable of expressing views and assessing the weight they should carry. These determinations should be made on a case-by-case basis, and factors of importance include social and cultural expectations, the child's living environment and the extent to which he or she is supported. The Committee finds that very young children can also express their views, even if non-verbally.

In its recommendations to States Parties, the Committee is repeatedly explicit about the right to participation. On 8 June 2015, it issued its Concluding Observations on the fourth periodic report of the Netherlands,¹³ in which it devotes much attention to the position of 'migrant children' (including children in asylum-seeker centres) and to children in the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. According to the Committee, these children are insufficiently 'seen'. Under B, General Principles (arts. 2, 3, 6 and 12 CRC), the Committee addresses 'respect for the views of the child':

30. The Committee notes the appointment of ad litem guardians to children in court proceedings. Nevertheless, it is concerned about the limited opportunities for children to participate in decisions and policies that affect them, especially in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom.

31. In the light of its General Comment No. 12 (2009) on the right of the child to be heard, the Committee recommends that the State party take measures to strengthen this right in accordance with article 12 of the Convention. To that effect, it recommends that the State party:

11 Blaak M et al., *Handboek Internationaal Jeugdrecht* (2012).

12 Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 on the right of the child to be heard (2009) CRC/C/GC/12.

13 Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on the fourth periodic report of the Netherlands (2015) CRC/C/NDL/CO/4.

(a) Develop toolkits for public consultation on national policy development to standardize such consultation at a high level of inclusiveness and participation, including consulting with children on issues that affect them;

(b) Conduct programmes and awareness-raising activities to promote the meaningful and empowered participation of all children within the family, community and schools, including within student council bodies, with particular attention to girls and children in vulnerable situations; and

(c) Institutionalize the children's Parliaments throughout the Kingdom as a regular event and ensure that it is provided with a meaningful mandate and adequate human, technical and financial resources, in order to facilitate children's effective engagement with national legislative processes on issues that affect them.

2.6 *The Netherlands and the CRC*

The Netherlands was among the more than 60 states to sign the Children's Rights Convention on 26 January 1990. It ratified the Convention five years later, with the result that the latter entered into force in the Netherlands on 8 March 1995.¹⁴ From that date, the Netherlands must comply with the Convention's stipulations in respect of all children growing up in its jurisdiction, including those living in asylum-seeker centres without a residence permit. The Convention furthermore applies fully and directly to children in the Caribbean Netherlands,¹⁵ making the Netherlands government directly responsible.¹⁶ This also applies to the period before 2010, when the islands were still part of the Netherlands Antilles.¹⁷

Since 1995, the Netherlands has reported four times to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. On every occasion, the Committee expressed concern about the situation of children in the Caribbean islands and in asylum-seeker centres, and offered several recommendations for improvement.¹⁸

14 Approval by Kingdom Act on 24 November 1994 (Stb. 1994, 862).

15 This concerns the islands of Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba.

16 See also Netherlands Institute for Human Rights, *Gelijke behandeling bij de toepassing van het Kinderrechtenverdrag in Caribisch Nederland* (2013) Utrecht.

17 See Blaak M et al., *Handboek Internationaal Jeugdrecht* (2012).

18 It exceeds the scope of this chapter to discuss these recommendations. They can be found in the respective research reports. This does not apply to the recent Concluding Observations by the Committee of 8 June 2015 (see above).

3 Studies on Vulnerable Children in the Netherlands

It is not self-evident that all children in the Netherlands can exercise their rights. This was the reason behind two extensive studies by UNICEF Netherlands into the situation of children in an asylum-seeker centre (2009) and of children in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2013).¹⁹

In the Netherlands, thousands of children grow up in a family living in an asylum seekers' centre or other form of asylum shelter.²⁰ These children, the subject of the first study, make up between one-third and one-fourth of all asylum seekers in the centralised reception of asylum seekers. After an often stressful journey, the children arrive with their families from different parts of the world to request asylum, and are by definition in a dependent and vulnerable position. They stay in an asylum centre as they wait for the decision on their asylum request, the consequences of a negative decision (return to the origin country or departure for another destination) or for other accommodation in the Netherlands. It means that children sometimes spend years on end living in an asylum centre. The situation of children in these circumstances had not been scrutinised thoroughly, even though experts – such as the members of the UN children's rights committee – had grave concerns about these children's well-being.

The second study pertained to the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, consisting of six islands.²¹ There was no overall picture of the situation of the more than 90,000 children growing up on these islands, but experts and organisations had been sounding the alarm about their situation for years. Poverty and violence were often mentioned, in addition to other problems. On several occasions, the Committee on the Rights of the Child voiced its serious concern regarding the extent to which these children could exercise their rights.

To map thoroughly the situation of these two groups of vulnerable children, UNICEF Netherlands conducted two large children's rights studies, in which

19 Kloosterboer K *Kind in het centrum. Kinderrechten in asielzoekerscentra* [Child in the centre. Children's rights in asylum-seeker centres] (2009); Kloosterboer K *Child on Bonaire, St. Eustatius, Saba. Children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands* (2013).

20 In June 2015, 6,765 children were living in asylum centres; by the end of September 2015, there were 10,532 of them in these centres (<http://www.coa.nl>).

21 Aruba, Curaçao and St. Maarten have been independent states within the Kingdom of the Netherlands since 2010. Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba have been part of the Netherlands since 2010 as 'public bodies' or 'special municipalities'. This study concentrates on the position of children in the Caribbean Netherlands (Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba, also referred to as the BES islands).

children's own views of their situation formed an important component.²² The two studies were similarly designed and collected information from three perspectives: the views and experiences of the children; the views and experiences of experts; and knowledge gained through (literature) research. The studies addressed all topics that affect children: family and parenting, education, health, safety, asylum procedures, recreation and leisure time, participation, domestic life, and finances. The children's actual situation in each of these areas was described and evaluated with reference to the minimum standards formulated in the Convention.

4 Children's Participation in the Studies

In the study on asylum-seeker centres, 66 children aged 4 to 18 years were interviewed, of whom 30 were boys and 36, girls. Additionally, eight parents were interviewed. The interviews were conducted at five asylum centres, which were selected by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (*Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers*, COA)²³ based on criteria formulated by the researchers. These criteria were an equal distribution of the number of interviewees across the type of asylum centre; across old and new centres; across different forms of accommodation; nearby or far away from a village or city; and spread across the country. As a general criterion, the asylum centre had to be representative of the shelter provided to children of families seeking asylum in the Netherlands.

In the Caribbean study, a total of 62 children aged between 6 and 18 years were interviewed across the three islands Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba. The preparation for and conducting of the interviews was done in collaboration with local organisations. The selection was based on children's willingness to participate, the need for a representative balance of boys and girls, the children's level of education, their background and their age. The local organisations also arranged for sufficient and suitable (separate) rooms to conduct the interviews.

22 UNICEF sees these studies as conditional to the exercise of its duty: to ensure that every country respects and observes children's rights. Article 45 of the CRC stipulates the role that specialised UN organisations such as UNICEF play in the implementation of the Convention and in monitoring compliance.

23 COA is an organisation responsible for the reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. For more information see <http://www.coa.nl>.

4.1 *Methodology*

The children's backgrounds were so diverse that a questionnaire validated for a specific group would not be suitable for all children. For that reason, it was decided not to interview the children according to a fixed and validated questionnaire. While the same meticulous approach was maintained throughout, this decision made it possible to adopt an explorative, qualitative approach using semi-structured and group interviews. The researchers wanted to be led by the children and allow them to determine the direction of the interviews.²⁴ The research activities were monitored by a steering group composed of relevant experts. In working with the children, the researchers applied the UNICEF guidelines for ethical research involving children.²⁵

Varying interview methods were used for the different age groups in order to suit the children's age, level of development and life-world. The study applied a multidisciplinary approach. With children up to the age of 12, three interview techniques were used in which the element of play had an important role. In both individual and group interviews, children from 12 to 18 years were asked semi-structured questions with the use of a number of tools (see Table 34.1).

Most of the children were very eager to participate in the study. Often they were unaccustomed to describing how they felt about things, and some were even genuinely surprised that the interviewers wanted to know their views on a range of matters.

TABLE 34.1 *Interview methods used per age group*

Age	Interview method
Up to 12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing. • Exploring the environment. • 'If I was in charge, then ...'
12 to 18 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews on various topics.

24 In the concluding phase of the study in the asylum centres, it emerged that similar research has been conducted in a comparable manner among refugee children in Australia. See Gifford S & C Bakopanos et al., 'Meaning or measurement? Researching the social contexts of health and settlement among newly arrived refugee youth in Melbourne, Australia' (2007) 20(3) *Journal of Refugee Studies*.

25 These are now to be found in the Strategic Guidance Note on Ethical Research (October 2013). See <http://www.unicef-irc.org/KM/ERIC/>.

4.1.1 Children up to 12 years

The interviews with this group of children used techniques that are suitable for children with a short attention span and which incorporated non-verbal elements. The aim was to have the child talk in the most relaxed and pleasant way possible, without exerting any pressure or steering the child in a certain direction. The three components provided for some variety. Most of the children gave a lot of information based on the drawing, while some children really loosened up when playing the game 'If I was in charge ...' (see below). The different components yielded different types of information. The topics to be addressed by the questions were drawn up in advance:²⁶ family and parenting, housing, recreation and leisure time, health, education, safety, asylum procedure, finances, participation and privacy. These derive directly from the various children's rights described in the CRC.

The interviewer began with an open-ended question that would allow further probing. The questions of the interview tool determined the course, but did not have to be phrased literally. The order in which topics were addressed followed the course of the interview. However, it was the intention to give every child the opportunity to say something about all of the topics.

Drawing

The first component involved drawing. The children were given sheets of drawing paper and magic markers, pencils and crayons, and were asked to draw the house or the room where they lived as well as the people staying with them. It was explained to them that it was not important whether it was a 'beautiful' or accurate drawing: whatever drawing they made was fine. The drawing then naturally stimulated a conversation. After the interview, children could have their photo taken with their drawing if they chose to.

Exploring the Environment

After the drawing component, the interviewers went outside with the children, usually in small groups. They asked the children one by one to point out their favourite place; that is, where they most liked to be, what they found attractive, where they felt happy. The interviewers also asked them if there were any places where they did not like to be or which they were afraid of or did not enjoy visiting for other reasons.

26 The topics were chosen on the basis of an analysis of topics in the CRC. The questionnaires created on that basis were compiled during extensive meetings with experts to ensure that every topic was broken down into the right sub-questions and phrased in a child-friendly manner.

If I was in Charge ...

'If I was in charge ...' is a game. The ingredients are simple: a pile of dressing-up clothes with hats, caps, ties and jackets. One by one the children, all dressed up, could stand up on a table or sit on a chair on a table. They were then invited to say what they would do if they were in charge of the asylum centre or of the island. Would they change anything or keep everything as is? The other children could also put questions to 'the boss'. They were encouraged to let their fantasies run freely.

Fun things were usually mentioned first, but more serious proposals tended to emerge soon afterwards. For instance, an 11-year-old boy said, 'I wish we were allowed to paint the walls'; a 15-year-old girl said, 'If I were in charge [...] then I would improve education and make sure there's more to do outside school hours.'

4.1.2 Children from 12 to 18 years

In the interviews with older children it was important that they could shape the conversation by determining the subject, order and manner of discussion. A number of tools were available to assist with this process.

First there was a list of areas of life from which the interviewee could choose. There were also photographs on the table of children in various situations, such as a child at play, a happy child, a scared child, a child visiting the doctor, and a child with a pet. These photographs often prompted the interviewee to start talking. The interviewer also had a set of cards with brief descriptions and pictograms of the various rights contained in the CRC, complemented with some imaginary rights. Most of the interviews with these older children lasted between 90 and 120 minutes.

Photography

After the interviews, small groups of children were lent digital cameras for a couple of days, with the instruction to photograph or film things and situations that were important to them. They were asked to record both things that worked well and things that could be improved. This image material was incorporated in the research report and used during presentations of the research results, but was not explicitly incorporated in the analysis phase of the study.

4.1.3 Processing

All of the interviews with the children were audio-recorded and furnished with supplementary information, such as an anonymised names for the children, their age and sex, and the date and place of the interview. These audio recordings were subsequently transcribed. In the analysis phase, statements

about the nine areas of life were identified in the interview texts. These statements were compiled in a database, always in the original formulation and sometimes also in edited form. The latter was sometimes required in order to shorten the original formulation or to split it into two different topics. This method, which incidentally was also used for the interviews with the experts and in the literature research, resulted in a research database containing 976 separate statements by children in asylum-seeker centres and 1,222 separate statements by children on the Caribbean islands. The database allows for detailed analyses of the statements according either to topic, location, age category and sex, or to a combination of these variables.

4.2 *The Effect of Children's Participation on the Research*

The extensive participation of children in the studies of their situation at the asylum centres and on the Caribbean islands had several effects.

First, children enjoyed working on a study dealing with their own situation. They felt they were taken seriously, and the process taught them to formulate and express their opinions. Some children 'grew' when they noticed that their views are important, and felt motivated to be more active in seeking opportunities for improvement in their daily lives.

Secondly, the researchers did not need to restrict themselves to the well-phrased views of an expert or to an apparently objective quantitative overview. They had spent real time with these children and were thus also able to reflect on the non-verbal communication they witnessed during the interviews.

Additionally, the interviews with children, and especially the manner in which they were processed, offered researchers the opportunity, during all phases of analysis and reporting, to remain in touch with the children and to use their original statements. This helped prevent an unintentional shift in meaning and undesirable translation into policy jargon.

Lastly, the original statements by the children were available for the reports and presentations, as well as for other publications.²⁷ This ensured continuing awareness that the problems that were identified and the solutions that were considered directly involve individual children. Naturally, protecting the interviewed children is of paramount importance, and the researchers only used statements that could not be traced to any child in particular.

27 Naturally, prior to the interviews, the parents of underage children were asked for permission (through [written] information, a permission form and individual contact), the purpose of the interviews was explained clearly to the children, and permission was requested to use their (anonymised) statements.

4.3 *Participation of Children in the Follow-up to the Studies*

A single quote from a child can be more powerful than a thorough elaboration of the situation of vulnerable children and references to the CRC. This already became clear when presenting the two previously mentioned studies (*Child in the Centre: Children's Rights in Asylum-Seeker Centres* (2009) and *Child on Bonaire, St. Eustatius, Saba* (2013)). Furthermore, during the (lobbying) process that followed the publication of the reports, it was evident time and again that a child's voice carries impact. With the words they use and straightforward formulations, children are often able to succinctly express existing difficulties and propose solutions that no politician or administrator would think of. Their words sometimes serve to illustrate or supplement research findings and often neatly sum up the situations that are described. Children's input enhances the search for means to improve the children's rights situation. However, their input should not be viewed separately from other research forms, in which facts and figures are marshalled and the views of experts presented; these forms of input should instead reinforce each other.

Children have also participated in the follow-up to both research projects and in the advocacy efforts to improve the situation of their peers. As a result, the topics have held strong interest for policy-makers, organisations and experts that work with or for these children, as well as for other stakeholders. Thus, the topics of 'children in asylum centres' and 'children's rights in the Caribbean Netherlands' have been on the political agenda ever since.

4.4 *Continued Involvement of Asylum Seekers' Children*

The sections above described how children were involved in the research. The impact of their expressed views has been significant, in good part because it was the first time they had been heard. Until these studies, their views were scarcely asked after or listened to; instead, it was assumed that parents can adequately represent their children. The studies have made clear that this notion is simplistic and that children's views should definitely be taken into account as well. After the research, children were asked for their input on many occasions. A few of these instances and their results are described below.

At the presentation of the report *Child in the Centre* in June 2009, a number of asylum seekers' children addressed the audience and a short film was shown in which three children describe what it is like to grow up in an asylum centre.²⁸ This film, and the stories by the children in attendance, emphasised the urgency of the need to improve their situation and prompted government officials to make immediate promises of follow-up action.

28 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2dt6vFCzT4>.

Furthermore, the publication of *Child in the Centre* led to the establishment of children's councils in asylum-seeker centres. In these councils, children can indicate what they find important in the centres, the problems they encounter, and the solutions they propose. Where possible, staff members of the centre concerned then respond to these calls to achieve real improvements in the centre and better interaction between children and staff members.

After the study a website was set up presenting information about asylum seekers' children, information intended for children, parents, professionals and other interested parties.²⁹ During the development of this website, one in which children's stories have a prominent place, children were asked about their needs and involved in its testing phase. The site offers an answer to one of the structural bottlenecks identified in the research: the lack of information about the situation of children in asylum centres.

As part of the lobbying efforts to improve the situation for children in asylum centres, several organisations united to establish *Werkgroep Kind in AZC* ('Working group children in asylum centres').³⁰ This group maintains regular contact with children living in asylum centres or other reception sites. It also arranges contact between children and, for example, members of parliament,³¹ which has significant added-value for both parties. Children feel seen, heard and taken seriously, and can communicate what they find important, while the members of parliament can hear the stories directly from the children and thereby maintain a feeling for the practical field. As a result, they are more willing to go the extra mile for these children, who now have a real face.

4.5 *Kingdom Children in Action*

Children in the Caribbean Netherlands are much less used to expressing their opinion than their European counterparts, either because they were never told that their opinion matters or because they are simply not aware that they can have their own opinion on matters. For many Caribbean parents and schools, children's participation is associated with a lack of respect for elders. This only added to the general amazement at what the children brought to the study and how to-the-point their views were. Parents, teachers, professionals and

29 See <http://www.tell-me.nl>.

30 For more information (in Dutch) see <http://www.kind-in-azc.nl>.

31 As with the presentation of the report '*Het is hier in één woord gewoon... stom!*' (2014), in which children describe their life in family centres. This led to a closed session in the Dutch House of Representatives on 3 June 2015 so that children could describe their situation in a safe setting.

policy-makers: all were sincerely touched by what the children said, which contributed to the impact of the research results.

Concurrently with the presentation of the research report *Child on Bonaire, St Eustatius, Saba*, the book *Kind op een eiland (Child on an island)* was presented at a large conference in May 2013.³² This book centres entirely on the children's statements. Also, a film was screened in which children represent 'their' island, and child reporters reported on the day. The input by children captured the attention of the media as well as those, like politicians, ministries, organisations and experts, who are in a position to improve the children's rights situation.

In September 2013, presentations of the research results were held on the islands. During special lessons at school, children were invited to respond to and discuss the results. This led to some interesting conversations, for example about violence in parenting. Some schools chose to organise a follow-up in the form of educational projects on children's rights.

In 2014, the Kingdom of the Netherlands celebrated its 200th anniversary. In that context, the Kingdom Youth Parliament (KYP) was organised on St. Maarten in May 2014.³³ This was a new initiative in which 50 young people from the islands and the Netherlands convened to learn from each other and to determine what and how they wish to contribute to the Kingdom. Children's rights were an important theme. The situation of children on the islands received a huge amount of attention, partly thanks to the presence of Princess Beatrix at the KYP.

As a result of the UNICEF studies, a Children's Rights Taskforce has been set up to draw up plans for the improvement of the children's rights situation on the islands. Each island will elaborate these plans and organise round table discussions with different sections of society. Children will be centrally involved in this process. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the CRC, UNICEF held a Children's Rights Summit, in which young people's input played a central role.³⁴ One of the themes concerned the Kingdom children, especially with regard to poverty and social exclusion. Children played an important role in the summit preparations and proceedings.

New initiatives in which children play a central role continue to emerge. As one example, there is the collaboration between UNICEF and the Missing

32 See <http://www.unicef.nl/wat-doet-unicef/kinderrechten-in-nl/koninkrijkskinderen/symposium/>.

33 See <http://www.kingdomyouthparliament.org>.

34 On 20 November 2014; see <http://www.unicef.nl/wat-doet-unicef/kinderrechten/25-jaar-kinderrechten/verslag-kinderrechtentop>.

Chapter Foundation.³⁵ These two organisations have taken the initiative to establish Children's Councils at businesses. Now, in consultation with the travel sector on the islands, the possibility of organising Children's Councils on the islands is being explored, with the first steps having been taken on Curaçao and Aruba in May 2015. Here, children can give their input to the policy of businesses in the tourist sector, which is a very important one on the islands.

5 Conclusion

There are several reasons why it is not a good idea to investigate children's situations without engaging their participation. Their perspective is important to forming a more complete picture of the situation, and often offers refreshing insights, including with respect to possible solutions. It also teaches children to participate in society, and they find it both valuable and enjoyable to contribute their views on their present and future situation. Last but not least, of course, the CRC demands it, for all the important underlying reasons.

The effects of research and the potential to improve the situation of vulnerable children based on the results are enhanced by children's input. Policy-makers are more inclined to adapt a policy if the children it affects are given a face and a voice; and when professionals engage the children in conversation about improvements, this dialogue has positive effects on the daily lives of the children involved as well as on the professionals. One powerful effect of youth participation in the research project and the follow-up is that it placed children firmly in the picture, both on the Caribbean islands and in the asylum-seeker centres. This in turn leads to involving children more frequently and effectively in policy development and knowledge exchange, as well as in parenting.

Much is required to put the CRC into concrete action, but the studies described above have shown that this is definitely possible through the participation of children. The 'success' of both studies was determined by a number of factors, such as the set-up, manner of implementation, the time period, and the image and independence of UNICEF. It cannot be objectively measured how children's participation ultimately contributes to improving their situation. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that the studies have had an unusually powerful impact. It is quite conceivable that much of this can be attributed to the voices of children being heard in these studies and through the follow-up activities.

35 See <http://www.unicef.nl/nieuws/berichten/2014/11/kick-off-raad-van-kinderen-in-zeisten> and www.missingchapter.org.

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Karin Kloosterboer - LLM
 Children's Rights Expert
 Kind met recht
www.kindmetrecht.nl
karin.kloosterboer@kindmetrecht.nl