

Child-friendly Concluding Observations

Lessons learned from
the Belgian experience



National Commission
on the Rights of the Child

WHY?



- All children should be heard and taken seriously in every decision-making process that may affect their lives, no matter if it is at local, national, regional or international level. This is a fundamental principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- The United Nations Committee on Children’s Rights (CRC) says that States parties have an obligation to ensure that children are encouraged and enabled to participate in the preparation of the State reports¹ to the Committee². To make this possible, children need to be informed on specific children’s rights recommendations for their state, as listed in the respective Concluding Observations (COBs).³
- The COBs are drafted in technical and complex language; not adapted to children. To ensure a better understanding and usage of the COBs by the wider public, professionals and children, they should be made accessible and comprehensible in the national language.⁴

1 The reporting cycle starts before the CRC starts when the national government submits its written State report on how it has implemented its children’s rights obligations to the Committee.

2 UN Doc. CRC/C/66/2, §1.

3 “After each session, the Committee drafts concluding observations on the situation of children’s rights in each of the countries it has just reviewed. These concluding observations are based on the dialogue between the Committee and the State and can only mention issues discussed during the country session. They constitute a public document, which contains a summary of the dialogue, the Committee’s recommendations to the State and the date for the submission of the next State report.” See: <https://crrreporting.childrightsconnect.org/standard-cycle/>.

4 <https://crrreporting.childrightsconnect.org/convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child-concluding-observations/>.

WHAT?

At the end of Belgium's last review by the CRC in 2019, the National Commission on the Rights of the Child – Belgium⁵ launched Fight4YourRight (#F4YR); a project aimed at developing a child-friendly version of the latest COBs. The outcome of this project is the result of an intense collaboration between an important number of actors, both adults and children.



⁵ The National Commission on the Rights of the Child is a Belgian official human rights body. The Commission works as a coordination platform gathering 90 governmental and non-governmental actors in the children's rights realm. For more information, please visit <https://nrc-cnde.be/en/>.

Fight4YourRight has the ambition to:



- make the COBs more accessible, understandable and appealing for children, governments, children's rights professionals and the overall population by 'translating' them into a child rights education and information tool, to be widely disseminated.
- enable children to contribute to the monitoring of Belgium's compliance with its children's rights obligations; and
- increase children's participation in societal decisions that affect them and foster a greater consideration of their views to inform decisions.

An important number of organisations – governmental and non-governmental – voluntarily joined hands in this participatory trajectory, striving for a common goal.

All organisations were part of a Steering Committee and were represented in specific sub-committees, overlooking various aspects of the project, such as strategy, communication, children's participation, planning and implementation of different activities.

Children themselves were partners throughout the entire project with regards to the content, the format and communication of the child-friendly COBs. In other words, the essence of the project. As a first initiative, Fight4YourRight focuses on youngsters aged 14-18 years old⁶ – hence, we prefer to refer to youth-friendly COBs when describing the project result.

The youth-friendly Concluding Observations can be discovered here⁷.

An educative poster graphically representing a selection of COBs, designed in co-creation with the children involved. Through augmented reality, the poster reverts to a broad digital content (including the textual version of the youth-friendly COBs, a child-friendly Convention on the Rights of the Child and pedagogical videos). This digital environment also provides an opportunity to update, refine and broaden the content beyond the poster in the future. The poster can be used within and beyond the educational context, with accompanying guidance materials.

6 This choice was among others inspired by the fact that fewer children's rights education activities are directed at this age range of children and by their outspoken wish to participate more in decision-making.

7 <https://ncrk-cnde.be/en/projects/fight-for-your-right-a-child-friendly-version-of-the-un-concluding-observations/the-youthfriendly-version-of-the-crc-s-concluding-observations/>

HOW?

In this leaflet, our ambition is to share successes and challenges of Fight4YourRight, as well as the levers for turning these challenges into opportunities. We want to inspire you and support similar initiatives in the future.

Create synergies



Embarking on this thrilling journey, a first challenge was the difficulty in finding guidance material and State practice with regard to developing child-friendly COBs. Building on the rich and diverse children's rights experience of the partners in this project, a methodology was carefully designed – and adapted throughout the project - to implement the children's views and to respond to their needs during the project as well as to take into account the impact of COVID-related measures.

- **Bring together diverse perspectives.** The primary responsibility for respecting, protecting and fulfilling children's rights lies with the State. However, a great number of non-State actors also have an important impact on the realisation of children's rights, such as ombudspersons, (coalitions of) non-governmental organizations, professionals, advocates, academics, and children themselves (see below – participation). Innovative ideas and practices spur from a diverse, rather than a homogeneous group. In the case of Fight4YourRight we brought together diverse perspectives from children, research, practice and policy and created learning opportunities for stakeholders by creating teams of implementing actors. In doing so, we matched different skills and competences and created bilingual (Dutch – French) groups.
- **Foster shared ownership.** Besides gathering a diverse group of actors, it is equally important to have a shared purpose and division of tasks between stakeholders. Actors can get disengaged during the project. During Fight4YourRight, we kept stakeholders on board by introducing status meetings, emphasizing their expertise and how this can improve the mission of their own organisation. We created a culture of shared decision-making where adults, but also children could decide on the next steps. When advancing in this participatory project, we noticed the need to engage different organisations or experts during the process. We would recommend introducing this reflection consistently during status meetings.

Work inclusively and in an age-adapted manner



According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child means 'every human being below the age of eighteen years'. It is abundantly clear however that this spans a wide age range and furthermore children have diverse experiences or living conditions. One same set of child-friendly COBs cannot be adapted to all aged 0 to 18.

- **Work age-adapted.** It is important to first determine, whether to develop different and complementary age-adapted child-friendly versions (for example: one version for ages 2-5, another for ages 5-8, and so on per age category) or to target one specific age-group. With Fight4YourRight the initial choice was made to develop a youth-friendly version of the COBs for children aged 14 to 18 years.
- **Take diverse opinions and living conditions into account.** It is important to underline that a homogenous group of children does not exist. Among those within the same age-group, a diversity of spoken languages, cultures, situations of vulnerability exist. With Fight4YourRight, the ambition was to reach out to a group of young people with diverse backgrounds, representative of the Belgian society to the extent possible.

Provide for meaningful participation



The rationale of developing child-friendly COBs – namely to foster participation and children’s rights education - necessarily implies the participation of children in the development of the instrument itself. Participation can take different forms and gradations. Throughout the project, children were consulted on the content and format of the COBs. They produced the visual support⁸ of the youth-friendly COBs and were actively involved in the communication and dissemination campaign. Fight4YourRight assured the guarantee of meaningful participation⁹. Before any participation, an internal analysis was made about its relevance. Meaningful participation also requires quality information on children’s rights and adapted background materials and a willingness to adapt the project outline to the children’s views and needs.

- **Start from children’s rights education as a necessary precondition.** For children to participate in a meaningful way, it is absolutely necessary to make sure they are effectively informed about / knowledgeable of some of the children’s rights. Even if children’s rights education programs are (widely) implemented in your country, one cannot be certain children are effectively knowledgeable

8 <https://ncrk-cnde.be/en/projects/fight-for-your-right-a-child-friendly-version-of-the-un-concluding-observations/the-youthfriendly-version-of-the-crc-s-concluding-observations/>

9 https://ncrk-cnde.be/IMG/pdf/kit_pedagogique_cf_cob_s.pdf

of children's rights. Fight4YourRight again revealed the importance of showing how children's rights are relevant to youth, by starting from topics they encounter in their daily lives and linking them to children's rights.

Children's rights education not only requires didactic tools. Success also lies in organising creative activities that extend beyond language as a form of communication and meeting and connecting with youth.

- **Prepare a guiding document for all adults working in the project.** At the onset of the Fight4YourRight project, a pedagogical kit was developed containing key information on The Convention on the Rights of the Child; the United Nations Committee on Children's Rights (CRC); the reporting mechanism of the CRC; and the content of the latest Concluding Observation. Useful resources and existing instruments in this area were added. This kit is not only useful in context of the Fight4YourRight-project but has the vocation to provide guidance for anyone who wishes to engage in child rights education activities and participatory initiatives. You can access the kit here¹⁰, feel free to use it! Informative videos were also developed with regards to the reporting process before the CRC¹¹ and the Concluding Observations¹². Informative videos, pictures and graphic content can be useful tools!
- **Keep youth engaged throughout the process by being flexible and open to change the initial project outline.** In the Fight4YourRight project, on several occasions, the project took different turns and working methods had to be adapted to the youngsters' views. Verifying the meaningfulness of working-sessions, the youth

10 https://ncrk-cnde.be/IMG/pdf/kit_pedagogique_cf_cob_s.pdf

11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsld-bVEHWo&ab_channel=AsBurch

12 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK_u9RG1FnE

involved were also given the option to express their views on planned activities. For example: due to the COVID19-pandemic, some workshops were initially planned virtually. Questioned about the idea to organize virtual workshops, the youth clearly indicated that for them this was not an efficient nor appealing working method and they wanted to connect and talk to other youngsters. The workshop content was adapted in the form of an outdoor walk in the woods, respecting the health measures while also increasing the engagement of the youth involved by directly responding to their needs.

- **Respect the children's views and create dialogue.** Sometimes the results and the methodology of a participatory trajectory may be very different than expected – the key is to embrace this and to be ready to step out of your comfort zone. For a number of reasons, it may not be possible to implement all the children's suggestions. Communication and feedback remain key. Provide careful explanation to participating children as to how their views were implemented and why some recommendations were not implemented.
- **Adults facilitating the activities with children and young people should have sufficient preparation, skills and training to do so.** Preparation and knowledge should not be limited to the principles of participation only. Equally important is familiarity with the project's trajectory and objectives. Within Fight4YourRight, actors facilitating the sessions with youth were also part of the Steering Committee. They were involved from the onset, and well aware of the context.

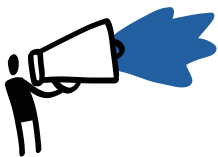
Pay attention to communication and dissemination of the child-friendly COBs



- **Translate the content of the COBs.** It may seem redundant to mention that information materials need to be adapted to the children participating, but in practice this can be an important field to prepare. Especially when working with complex documents such as Concluding Observations. In the Fight4YourRight-project, an attempt was made to work on the original version of the COBs with the youth. Pretty soon, it was apparent the original version was too complicated to work with and that trying to do so could even be quite counterproductive in terms of motivation. The Steering Committee thus worked on a first adaptation of the COBs by “getting rid” of superfluous terms, adding child-friendly definitions (taken from already existing child-friendly materials), and rephrasing recommendations. The broad composition and diverse experience of the members of the Steering Committee vouch for the quality of the exercise. Afterwards, this adapted version was further worked on with the youth.
- **Consult children as to what constitutes an effective and appealing support for the child-friendly COBs.** In the Fight4YourRight project, the youngsters participating in the project decided that the COBs needed to be portrayed on an educative poster, inextricably linked to

a digital content (not in the form of a website, but rather a centralized way of finding children's right information in a digital format). With assistance of a graphic recorder, the COBs were drawn on a poster based on advice and sketches from the youngsters.

Communication and dissemination of the child-friendly COBs.



- **Ask children how and where they want to receive information on child-friendly COBs.** Youngsters involved in Fight4YourRight indicated that Instagram and TikTok were interesting channels to reach other young people, but they were not convinced that children and young people also want to be informed about children's rights through these channels. They indicated that school programmes needed to integrate this product more. The Fight4YourRight project showed us that developing child-friendly COBs without paying attention to children's rights education is not desirable. As mentioned before, it is a precondition for meaningful participation. This finding was an incentive to motivate involved actors in the Steering Committee to develop a policy advice on this matter.

- **Think of the dissemination objective of the child-friendly COBs from the outset of the project.** The target audience should be determined from the outset of the project as it can influence decisions with regards to the outcomes of the project themselves, the support materials. Possibly, thinking of dissemination will highlight the need for accompanying instruments such as pedagogical notes. In the end, the audience will impact the communication and diffusion strategy and campaign. In the Fight4YourRight project, initially the reflection about dissemination was kept on a general level. The exercise was refined in the aftermath, when it became apparent which outputs the project had generated. For example, when the augmented reality poster was produced, the idea followed to develop a 'tutorial' on how to use and work with these youth-friendly COBs.

NOTES



**Want to know
more? Feel free
to reach out. It will
be our pleasure
to share our
experience!**



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info@ncrk-cnde.be



#F4YR