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## Empowering the Future: Enhancing Child Participation in Transitional Justice

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## Abstract

This report examines the recognition of children as active participants in post-conflict truth and reconciliation processes. Despite being among the most affected by conflict, children are often excluded from transitional justice mechanisms, particularly Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs). Grounded in international legal standards and case studies from such places as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Timor-Leste, and Colombia, the report shows that child participation enriches truth-seeking, supports healing, and strengthens inclusive peacebuilding. It highlights both direct (testimonies, art, dialogue) and indirect (civil society representation, youth parliaments) models of participation, emphasising the importance of safety, consent, and age-appropriate methods. Yet most TRCs lack structured approaches for engaging children or reporting outcomes back to them. Legal, cultural, and logistical barriers continue to marginalise children's voices and limit their influence. The report concludes with clear policy recommendations: integrate child participation into TRC mandates and peace agreements, ensure ethical protections, provide dedicated resources, and design inclusive processes that reflect the diverse experiences of children affected by conflict.

## Key Findings

- 1. Children are Among the Most Affected, Yet Marginalised in Transitional Justice**  
Despite enduring grave harms—such as forced recruitment, sexual violence, and displacement—children are often excluded from truth and reconciliation processes.
- 2. Legal and Normative Frameworks Support Child Participation**  
International and regional instruments (e.g., CRC, ACRWC, UNSC Resolution 2427) affirm the right of children to participate in transitional justice, though implementation remains inconsistent.
- 3. Child Participation Enhances Truth, Healing, and Inclusion**  
Direct and indirect involvement of children enriches the truth-seeking process, supports psychological healing, and fosters inclusive peacebuilding by recognising children as agents of change.
- 4. Ethical and Cultural Barriers Undermine Participation**  
Concerns about re-traumatisation, confidentiality, and age-based legal restrictions often prevent meaningful engagement with children, especially in cultures that marginalise youth voices.
- 5. Best Practices Demonstrate Feasibility of Ethical Participation**  
Examples from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Colombia show that safe, ethical, and inclusive child engagement is possible through child-specific hearings, creative expression, and child-friendly reporting.
- 6. Gaps in Follow-up and Reporting to Children**  
Few TRCs provide feedback to child participants or produce accessible reports. This lack of reciprocity weakens trust and the legitimacy of child engagement.
- 7. Diversity of Children's Experiences Often Overlooked**  
Children are not a monolithic group. Experiences vary widely across gender, age, disability, ethnicity, and wartime roles, requiring tailored approaches.
- 8. Participation is Underrepresented in Peace Agreements**  
While hundreds of peace agreements reference children, few institutionalise child participation in truth-telling or post-conflict mechanisms.

## Introduction

Transitional justice aims to confront the legacies of grave human rights violations by establishing accountability, acknowledging victims, and promoting reconciliation. However, in these processes, the specific needs and voices of children are frequently marginalised. Children endure unique and often severe forms of harm during conflict, including forced recruitment, family separation, displacement, sexual violence, and loss of education. Despite these experiences, they are rarely afforded opportunities to contribute to or shape the mechanisms designed to address those harms. Echoing previous studies, this report calls for a paradigm shift toward a child-centred approach in transitional justice. It advocates for recognising children as agents of change whose participation can enrich truth-seeking, reparative, and reconciliatory initiatives, ultimately leading to more sustainable and inclusive peace.

This report focuses primarily on Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) as a key transitional justice mechanism. TRCs often provide accessible and flexible platforms for hearing diverse voices, including those of children, through a variety of participatory methods such as testimonies, creative expressions, and consultations. By concentrating on TRCs, the report highlights concrete opportunities to integrate child participation into processes that document historical truths, foster acknowledgment, and facilitate societal healing—foundational steps toward achieving lasting peace and justice.

## The Case for Child Participation

The active involvement of children in transitional justice processes is increasingly recognised as both a legal imperative and a vital component of effective, inclusive post-conflict recovery. Children are not only among the most affected by conflict and injustice but also possess unique perspectives and experiences that are essential to truth-seeking, reconciliation, and social healing. This section explores the foundational legal frameworks that affirm children's participatory rights, the ways in which TRCs have incorporated these principles, and the significant benefits that meaningful child participation brings to transitional justice mechanisms. By foregrounding children's experiences, transitional justice can move beyond viewing them solely as victims to recognising them as active agents in shaping a more just and peaceful future.

### Legal Foundations

The right of children to participate in matters that affect them is well-established in international law. The [United Nations \(UN\) Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#), particularly Article 12, underscores that children capable of forming their own views must be granted the opportunity to express them freely in all relevant matters. This principle applies unequivocally to transitional justice contexts. The Committee on the Rights of the Child—the expert body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the CRC—has played a pivotal role in clarifying and expanding the meaning of child participation, especially in conflict-affected settings. Through its General Comments and guidance, the Committee emphasises that meaningful participation must be safe, respectful, and adapted to children's evolving capacities, recognising their right to be heard as an essential component of their protection and empowerment in situations of armed conflict and post-conflict recovery (see box 1).

## Box 1: Authoritative Texts on Child Participation

### Article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views 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.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

### Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change, 22 August 2023, CRC/C/GC/26

94... States should cooperate to invest in conflict prevention and efforts to sustain peace that will positively contribute to mitigating any environmental harm to children that could result from armed conflict and should consider the views of children in peacemaking and peacebuilding.

### Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, 6 December 2016, CRC/C/GC/20

82... States should support opportunities for adolescent participation in peace movements and peer-to-peer approaches to non-violent conflict resolution rooted in local communities, to ensure the sustainability and cultural appropriateness of interventions.

### Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009) The right of the child to be heard, 20 July 2009, CRC/C/GC/12

125. The Committee underlines that the right embodied in article 12 does not cease in situations of crisis or in their aftermath. There is a growing body of evidence of the significant contribution that children are able to make in conflict situations, post-conflict resolution and reconstruction processes following emergencies.

Thus, the Committee emphasized in its recommendation after the day of general discussion in 2008 that children affected by emergencies should be encouraged and enabled to participate in analysing their situation and future prospects. Children's participation helps them to regain control over their lives, contributes to rehabilitation, develops organizational skills and strengthens a sense of identity. However, care needs to be taken to protect children from exposure to situations that are likely to be traumatic or harmful.

126. Accordingly, the Committee encourages States parties to support mechanisms which enable children, in particular adolescents, to play an active role in both post-emergency reconstruction and post-conflict resolution processes. Their views should be elicited in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes...

**Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the combined fourth and fifth periodic reports of Colombia, CRC/C/COL/CO/4-5 (CRC 2015)**

The Committee urges the State party to:

(j) Continue ensuring that children's opinions, interests and needs are considered during the current peace process.

**African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990**

Article 7

**FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

Every child who is capable of communicating his or her own views shall be assured the rights to express his opinions freely in all matters and to disseminate his opinions subject to such restrictions as are prescribed by laws.

Similarly, the [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child \(ACRWC\)](#) is a regional human rights treaty that complements the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by addressing the specific cultural, social, and economic contexts of African children. Adopted by the African Union in 1990 and entered into force in 1999, the Charter provides a comprehensive framework for protecting children's rights, including their right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Regarding child participation, the ACRWC explicitly affirms children's right to be heard and to express their views freely, particularly in matters that concern them. Article 7 of the Charter states that every child who can communicate his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, and that these views should be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. This provision underscores the principle of evolving capacities, recognising that children's ability to participate develops over time and must be respected.

Beyond international law, the United Nations Security Council is the UN's primary body responsible for maintaining international peace and security. Its resolutions carry significant authority, shaping global responses to conflicts and setting standards for member states and international actors. In the context of children and armed conflict, Security Council resolutions establish critical norms and frameworks aimed at protecting children's rights, addressing their specific needs, and promoting their participation in peacebuilding and transitional justice processes. These resolutions guide international efforts to prevent recruitment and abuse of children in conflict, support their rehabilitation, and ensure their voices are included in decisions affecting their futures. [Resolution 2427](#) highlights the significance of integrating child protection and participation across peace and post-conflict processes. Specifically, it calls upon Member States, UN entities, and other relevant actors to actively incorporate children's views wherever possible during peace negotiations, ceasefire agreements, and peacebuilding efforts (para. 22). This recognises children not only as vulnerable populations needing protection but as stakeholders whose perspectives are essential for durable peace and justice. The resolution further urges that children's views be considered throughout the entire conflict cycle—including in programming, post-conflict recovery, reconstruction, and peacebuilding initiatives (para. 23). This ensures that transitional justice mechanisms and related processes prioritise the rights, well-being, and empowerment of children affected by armed conflict. By embedding child participation as a normative expectation in peace and justice frameworks, the resolution supports efforts to create child-sensitive transitional justice measures that acknowledge children's experiences, facilitate their reintegration, and help prevent future cycles of violence.

## Benefits of Participation

Incorporating children into transitional justice processes yields multiple benefits. Participation can be therapeutic, helping children process trauma through storytelling, testimony, and expressive arts. As Rana and Zvobgo note:

[Truth and Reconciliation] Commissions can provide children a safe environment in which to express complex feelings related to their experiences of violence—feelings like fear, guilt, and self-blame—and a means by which to work through them—notably, testimony (2021: 286).

Participation also promotes empowerment and civic engagement, encouraging children to see themselves as contributors to social recovery. As noted by the UN (2010: 6):

When children are supported and guided, their participation can help to build their capacity for active citizenship in post-conflict recovery, also laying the foundation for a more just and peaceful society. Transitional justice processes and mechanisms should strengthen the protective environment for children in their families and communities.

Gow (2002: 2) develops that '[e]nabling children to participate is an important component of giving children the political space to take a progressive role in their own societies.' Beyond individual healing, child participation has a restorative effect on communities by facilitating reintegration and breaking cycles of exclusion and marginalisation (Mollica, 2023). Moreover, such engagement challenges prevailing perceptions of children as passive victims, instead positioning them as active citizens with valuable insights and experiences. As illustrated in box 2 below, children's participation in Liberia's TRC helped to identify a wide range of human rights violations specific to their experiences—an important benefit that not only enriches truth-seeking but also ensures that transitional justice processes address the full scope of harm affecting children. The mandate of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2005–2009) explicitly acknowledged children's rights and outlined specific protections for their participation. In practice, the Liberian TRC surpassed the efforts of the Sierra Leone commission by systematically involving children in all aspects of its work, both in the capital, Monrovia, and across the country (UNICEF, 2010: 11).

## Box 2: Findings from Liberia TRC

### 1. Systematic Violations of Children's Rights

- ▶ Liberia's children suffered gross and systematic violations of their rights during the civil conflicts (1989–1996 and 1999–2003).
- ▶ All armed groups—including government forces and rebels—targeted children in violation of international humanitarian and human rights law.

### 2. Types of Violations Documented

- ▶ The TRC recorded 18 categories of abuse against children, including:
  - Targeted killings, torture, mutilation
  - Abduction, forced recruitment into armed groups
  - Rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage
  - Forced labour and domestic servitude
  - Displacement, loss of family, and denial of education.

### 3. Child Soldiers

- ▶ Children comprised 10–20% of armed group members.
- ▶ They were used as combatants, porters, cooks, spies, and sexual slaves.
- ▶ Many children were forcibly drugged, manipulated, and socialised into violent behaviour.

### 4. Dual Role: Victims and Perpetrators

- ▶ Many children were coerced into committing atrocities.
- ▶ While they committed grave acts, the TRC stressed that these children were not legally responsible, as they were manipulated, traumatised, and used by adults.

### 5. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

- ▶ Girls as young as ten were subjected to systemic rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage.
- ▶ These crimes were widespread and unpunished, and many victims remain without medical or psychosocial care.

## 6. Ethnic Targeting

- ▶ Children were often victims of violence based on ethnicity, particularly among groups like the Gio, Mano, Mandingo, and Krahn during different phases of the conflict.

## 7. Long-Term Impact and Trauma

- ▶ War disrupted education, destroyed healthcare systems, and tore apart families.
- ▶ Children described feelings of abandonment, inferiority, and the desire for justice, forgiveness, and healing.

## 8. Reparations and Expectations

- ▶ Children expressed strong expectations for:
  - Reparations—both symbolic and material
  - Free education and vocational training
  - Reintegration programs for those stigmatised by wartime roles
  - Memorialisation through events and inclusion of war history in school curricula.

## 9. Policy and Institutional Gaps

- ▶ While Liberia made legal progress (e.g., Rape Law of 2006, draft Children's Law), the TRC found a lack of leadership and coordination in delivering sustained child protection and welfare services.

## 10. Recommendations

The TRC urged the government to:

- ▶ Prevent re-recruitment of child soldiers
- ▶ Provide inclusive, community-wide reparations
- ▶ Develop outreach and education campaigns using a child-friendly version of the TRC report
- ▶ Strengthen legal protections and ensure full implementation of child rights frameworks

### *Summary*

International legal instruments firmly establish children's right to participate in decisions affecting them, including transitional justice. However, realising these rights in practice requires moving beyond symbolic references to build systems that meaningfully engage children, uphold their agency, and ensure their perspectives shape post-conflict narratives and outcomes.

## Models of Child Participation

There is a range of models focusing on different approaches to and levels of child participation (see Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001; Lundy, 2007). These frameworks help to conceptualise how children can be meaningfully involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives. TRCs may also design participation mechanisms along a spectrum of direct and indirect engagement, each with distinct roles, benefits, and limitations. The legal foundations of TRCs play a critical role in shaping their scope, priorities, and inclusiveness—particularly regarding the experiences of vulnerable groups such as children. As box 3 illustrates, drawing on the authors' own analysis of TRC mandates and practice, examples from Liberia and Sierra Leone demonstrate the importance of explicitly referencing victims and marginalised groups within a TRC's mandate (see Molloy, 2025). The components highlighted in the box were compiled by reviewing both legal frameworks and operational approaches, in order to distil the aspects most relevant to children's participation. In Sierra Leone, for instance, the TRC was established in 2000 by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act, which specifically called upon the Commission to give special attention to children and their experiences during the armed conflict. The comparison with South Africa, rather than Liberia or Colombia, is significant because the South African TRC remains the most widely cited model globally, and its lack of explicit provisions for children highlights a stark contrast with Sierra Leone's more child-sensitive mandate.

### Box 3: Direct vs Indirect Child Participation

| Aspect                                   | Sierra Leone TRC (Direct)   | South Africa TRC (indirect)  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Legal and Institutional Framework</b> |   |  |
| Mandate regarding children               | Explicit inclusion of children as both victims and actors in conflict; required a special focus on child combatants and war-affected youth. | Children were not explicitly mentioned in the TRC's founding legislation (Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995). No special measures targeted child participation. |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Partnerships for child protection          | Strong collaboration with UNICEF and CPAs (Child Protection Agencies), formalised through MOUs to ensure child safety and informed participation. | Lacked structured partnerships with child-focused agencies during the TRC process.                                |
| <b>Protection, Ethics, and Methodology</b> |   |   |
| Confidentiality                            | Ensured through in-camera hearings for children; identity protection was prioritised.   | No specific provisions for confidential hearings for children; those under 18 generally did not testify publicly. |
| Consent protocols                          | Required child assent and guardian consent. Participation was voluntary and based on a safety assessment.   | Participation of minors was minimal and not systematised.   |
| Psychosocial support                       | Psychosocial support Provided during and after testimony via trained counsellors, with mechanisms for referral and follow-up.                     | No formal psychosocial infrastructure integrated into TRC processes for children.                                 |

| <b>Participation and Representation</b> |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Public testimonies                      | Organised special thematic hearings for children and youth, with input into both private and public proceedings.                              | No dedicated child hearings. Youth testimonies occurred occasionally, but there was no formal channel for child-specific experiences. |
| Report inclusion                        | Included a dedicated chapter on children, with child-specific analysis and data. Also published a child-friendly version of the final report. | While youth were mentioned, the final report lacked child-specific sections or outputs tailored to younger audiences.                 |
| <b>Legacy and Innovation</b>            |   |   |
| Contribution to international norms     | Became a model for ethical child participation in transitional justice, influencing later TRCs (e.g., Liberia, Colombia).                     | Set the foundation for truth commissions, but was adult-centred and did not integrate modern child rights principles.                 |

Notably, children were engaged not only as subjects of investigation but also as active participants in the Commission's preparatory stages, research, and investigative work—an innovative development explored further in the sections that follow. By contrast, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (established in 1995) did not explicitly single out children in its founding mandate. While the Commission took on a broad mandate to address human rights violations under apartheid, the inclusion of children's specific experiences was less pronounced in formal terms. Nevertheless, the South African TRC made efforts to capture the voices of young victims and survivors through public hearings and victim submissions, although children's participation was generally indirect or mediated by adults and organisations. These varied approaches to child inclusion within TRCs highlight the importance of designing participation mechanisms that balance direct engagement—where children themselves actively contribute—and indirect methods that ensure their voices are represented through trusted intermediaries. The following sections explore these different forms of participation, examining their roles, benefits, and challenges in fostering meaningful child involvement in transitional justice.

### Direct Participation

Direct participation involves children actively engaging in the truth-telling process themselves. This engagement can take various forms, each providing unique opportunities for children to express their experiences and perspectives:

- ▶ **Testimonies:** Children may be invited to share personal accounts of their experiences during conflict, including violations they suffered or witnessed.  
*Example:* During Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, some former child soldiers gave testimonies detailing their recruitment and life in armed groups, helping to document abuses while reclaiming their stories.
- ▶ **Creative Expressions:** When verbal testimonies are not feasible or appropriate, children can contribute through art, poetry, drawings, theatre, music, or multimedia.  
*Example:* In Colombia's peace process, children from conflict-affected regions created drawings and murals depicting their hopes for peace and the impact of violence on their lives, which were exhibited as part of the truth-seeking efforts.

- ▶ **Workshops and Dialogue Spaces:** Structured workshops provide safe, age-appropriate environments where children explore their experiences and share their visions for the future.

*Example:* In Liberia, NGOs organised participatory workshops for child survivors of conflict where they engaged in dialogue, role-playing, and storytelling exercises to help process trauma and articulate their needs for community reconciliation.

#### Box 4: Liberia's approach to child participation

Children were extensively involved in Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) through a dedicated "Children's Agenda," which recognised them as both victims and participants in the civil conflict. The TRC adopted specific procedures to ethically and meaningfully include children throughout the truth-seeking process. The components discussed below are drawn from the authors' own review of Liberia's TRC Act, final report, and secondary documentation, and are presented here in summary form for analytical clarity

##### 1. Dedicated Mandate and Legal Inclusion

- ▶ The TRC Act specifically required attention to children's experiences, especially child soldiers and victims of war-related abuses.
- The TRC was tasked with creating child-specific mechanisms and recommendations for rehabilitation and reintegration.

##### 2. Key Partnerships and Coordination

- ▶ Over 80 Child Protection Agencies (CPAs) formed a TRC Task Force to ensure child-friendly engagement.
- UNICEF played a central role by providing financial and technical support, helping to draft interview guidelines, train child-friendly statement takers, and oversee protection measures.

##### 3. Child-Friendly Procedures

- ▶ The TRC developed principles ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and trauma-sensitive interviews.

- ▶ Statement takers were trained in child protection, and interviews were held in safe environments. Girls were interviewed by female staff, and social workers were available throughout.

#### **4. Awareness-Raising and Statement Collection**

- ▶ Awareness workshops reached around 5,000 children across Liberia's 15 counties to educate them about the TRC's purpose and address misconceptions or fears.
- ▶ Children gave 280 formal statements, collected with support from social workers and CPAs.

#### **5. Thematic and Regional Hearings**

- ▶ The TRC conducted three regional children's hearings (in Bong, Bomi, and Grand Gedeh counties), where children gave anonymous testimonies behind screens to protect their identities.
- ▶ These hearings allowed commissioners and the public to hear children's wartime experiences and understand their perspectives on justice and reconciliation.
- ▶ A Monrovia institutional hearing brought together over 300 participants and expert groups to discuss children's war experiences and post-conflict needs.

#### **6. Creative and Expressive Platforms**

- ▶ The TRC organised a Children's Art Gallery, allowing 210 children to express their war-time memories and hopes through drawings, poems, and paintings.
- ▶ Selected artworks were showcased publicly and archived as part of the national record.

#### **7. National Consultations and Children's Parliament**

- ▶ Children participated in regional consultations and a national conference, contributing recommendations for Liberia's post-war future.
- ▶ The Children's Parliament engaged directly with TRC commissioners, facilitating dialogues on children's rights and expectations.

#### 8. Inclusion in Final Report

- ▶ A full Children's Chapter was drafted for the final TRC report, supported by an international child rights expert.
- ▶ A child-friendly version of the TRC report was also planned to make findings accessible to Liberia's young population.

#### Intergenerational Testimonies and Reflections

In many truth-telling processes, especially those addressing long-term or historical injustices, children may not always speak about current harms, but rather reflect on trauma experienced across generations. This form of participation often involves:

- ▶ Adults recounting their childhood experiences of violence, systemic abuse, or exclusion.
- ▶ Children and youth reflecting on the impact of such experiences on their families, communities, and sense of identity—what is often termed intergenerational trauma.

These testimonies and reflections allow for a broader understanding of how harm persists over time, and how healing must also be multigenerational.

### Box 5: Stories and Insights Across Generations

During **Canada's** Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many Indigenous adults testified about the abuse they suffered as children in the Indian Residential School system. Their stories not only revealed the scope of abuse but also illuminated the continuing impact on their children and grandchildren. Youth also participated by expressing how intergenerational trauma shaped their own lives, often through school-based events, public forums, and cultural projects tied to reconciliation efforts.

**In Australia**, descendants of the Stolen Generations shared how the forced removal of their parents and grandparents from their families continued to shape their relationships, cultural knowledge, and mental health. These intergenerational stories helped frame historical child rights violations as living legacies rather than past events.

**In Colombia**, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ethical sensitivities of working directly with children, the Truth Commission faced limitations in collecting testimonies from minors—only 55 testimonies came directly from children. To address this, the Commission used an alternative but equally valuable approach: gathering testimonies from adults who spoke about their past as children during the armed conflict.

### Indirect Participation

Indirect participation allows children's views and experiences to be represented by intermediaries, ensuring inclusivity even when direct engagement is impractical or unsafe:

- **Representation by NGOs and Civil Society:** Organisations working directly with children can collect and submit testimonies, reports, or thematic findings on children's experiences.

*Example:* In East Timor, the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation worked alongside NGOs and child-focused civil society groups to facilitate the safe collection of testimonies from children affected by the 1999 conflict, ensuring their experiences were documented respectfully and securely.

- ▶ **Youth Collectives and Parliaments:** Organised groups like youth parliaments or school forums can present aggregated views, priorities, or recommendations on behalf of children.

*Example:* In South Africa, youth groups associated with the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission helped channel the voices of younger generations through youth forums, which contributed to discussions about the future role of young people in rebuilding the nation.

- ▶ **Research and Consultations:** TRCs may commission targeted studies, surveys, or consultations involving children, led by trusted partners trained in ethical engagement.

*Example:* East Timor's Commission supported consultations facilitated by experts who conducted child-friendly surveys and focus groups in remote communities to better understand children's needs and experiences during the conflict and transition.

Indirect participation allows the inclusion of children from hard-to-reach areas or those vulnerable to re-traumatisation, ensuring their perspectives are amplified through trusted representatives while safeguarding their well-being.

### Participation as a Continuum

It is important to understand these modalities not as mutually exclusive, but as points along a continuum of inclusion. A well-designed TRC process may blend direct and indirect strategies based on children's needs, preferences, and levels of risk. Participation must also adapt to children's ages, backgrounds, gender identities, and experiences—reflecting the diversity of childhood itself. As transitional justice aims to reckon with the past and pave the way for a more just and peaceful future, child participation should be viewed not only as a rights-based obligation, but as a vital opportunity. When TRCs invest in meaningful and respectful engagement with children, they not only produce a more accurate and inclusive historical record—they also help raise a generation that sees justice not as an abstract concept, but as a lived, participatory process.

## Creative and Inclusive Practices

Inclusive methods are essential for making transitional justice processes accessible and relevant to children of different ages and backgrounds. Tailoring engagement tools to children's needs not only fosters understanding but also encourages meaningful participation:

- ▶ **Child-friendly reports**—such as illustrated versions or age-appropriate summaries—help children understand and engage with outcomes.
- ▶ **Art and theatre** provide therapeutic and expressive outlets, allowing children to articulate trauma in symbolic ways.
- ▶ **Interactive learning tools**, such as games or group activities, are effective with younger age groups.
- ▶ **Digital platforms**—like video storytelling, voice recordings, or social media—can reach remote or marginalised populations.

Alongside TRCs like Sierra Leone (see box 6), the Colombian Truth Commission (CEV) created various participatory spaces where children and youth could explore their experiences and reflections on the conflict through creative forms, including drawing and painting, storytelling and oral history, theatre and performance and music and poetry. These activities were not solely therapeutic; they were recognised as valid forms of truth-telling and memory construction. They helped foster emotional safety, identity recovery, and collective dialogue, particularly in communities affected by violence.

### Box 6: Sierra Leone's National Vision Project

As part of its child-focused efforts, Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) initiated the National Vision Project, which provided a platform for children to express their hopes for a peaceful future. Over 250 creative contributions were collected from children across the country. These included:

- ▶ Drawings
- ▶ Poems
- ▶ Personal essays

The purpose was to allow children—many of whom had been directly affected by conflict—to articulate what peace, unity, and recovery meant to them.

These submissions were more than symbolic. They were:

- ▶ Publicly exhibited in forums and community events.
- ▶ Used as educational tools in the Commission's outreach and reconciliation activities.
- ▶ Integrated into the TRC's messaging, helping to centre children's visions in national dialogue on healing and reconstruction.

By showcasing these works, the National Vision Project helped reframe children as active agents of peacebuilding, not just passive victims of war. It became an early example of how truth commissions can incorporate creative, participatory, and therapeutic approaches to transitional justice for young people.

## Child Participation and Peace Agreements

Peace agreements frequently establish the framework for a society's transition from conflict to peace, shaping future governance, legal systems, and reconciliation efforts. Explicitly including provisions for children's rights and participation ensures that their unique experiences during conflict are acknowledged and addressed in the long term. Children suffer the consequences of war in deeply personal and often overlooked ways—through recruitment as soldiers, loss of family, displacement, and trauma. Excluding them from peace processes not only fails to recognise these harms but also risks undermining the legitimacy, sustainability, and inclusiveness of the peace itself. By embedding child-focused commitments in peace agreements, states and negotiators affirm a broader vision of justice and social rebuilding that truly includes all members of society.

### Box 7: Peace Agreement References to Children and Truth Commissions

#### Colombia, 15/12/2015, Agreement on the Victims of Conflict, 'Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-repetition, including the Special Jurisdiction for Peace; and Commitment on Human Rights

Page 6, Article 5.1. Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-repetition, ...

The Comprehensive System has a differentiated and gender-based approach, which is designed to respond to the characteristics of victimization in each territory and each population, and in particular to the needs of women and children.

Pages 9-10, Article 5.1.1.1. Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition, ... First, the Commission shall contribute to the clarification of what happened, in accordance with the elements of the mandate as described later, and offer a substantive explanation of the complexity of the conflict, in such a way as to promote a shared understanding in society, in particular of the least-known aspects of the conflict, as the impact of the conflict on children and adolescents and gender-based violence, among other matters. ...The Commission will develop an appropriate differential and gender approach that allows evidencing the differential forms in which the conflict affected women, children, adolescents, young people and older adults,

to persons in situations of disability, to indigenous peoples, to peasant communities, to Afro-Colombian, black, palenquero and raizal populations, to the population LGBTI, to displaced persons and exiled, [women and men] defenders of human rights, trade unionists, journalists, and women and men farmers, traders and businessmen/ women, among others. This should also contribute to the Colombian society's understanding of the specific ways in which the conflict reproduced historical mechanisms of discrimination and gender stereotypes, as a critical first step to having a more just and inclusive society.

**South Sudan, 17/08/2015, Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS)**

**2. Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH)**

**2.1. Establishment of the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH)**

2.1.3 The Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs of the TGoNU, in collaboration with other stakeholders and the civil society, shall conduct public consultations for a period not less than one (1) month prior to the establishment of the CTRH, to inform the design of the legislation referred to in Chapter IV, Article (1.1). This notwithstanding, such consultations shall ensure that the experiences of women, men, girls and boys are sufficiently documented and the findings of such consultations incorporated in the resultant legislation.

Analysis of the PA-X Peace Agreements Database shows that over 370 agreements have referenced children or youth since 1990. However, few include mechanisms to translate those references into action. Rather, while there is some acknowledgment of children's experiences during conflict, indicating they should be consulted or at least have their experiences recorded, peace agreements do not explicitly guarantee participatory decision-making by children themselves—nor does it define how their voices are to be gathered or used.

## Inclusive Outreach

Ensuring that the findings of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) and the outcomes of children's participation are meaningfully communicated back to children is essential to upholding their right to information, fostering trust, and validating their contributions. The Sierra Leone TRC produced multiple accessible versions of its findings. These included a child-friendly report, officially recognised and developed collaboratively with UNICEF and child participants and a video report and a secondary school report, further diversifying access formats. Children contributed to the design and content of the child-friendly report through The Children's Forum Network, The Voice of Children Radio and The Children's National Assembly, which included representatives from all districts and was broadcast nationally. These participatory platforms emphasised partnership, relationship-building, and inclusion, challenging the dominant adult-centric approach to institutional reconciliation.



Figure 1: Sierra Leone Child Friendly Report (<https://www.sierraleonetr.com/downloads/childrensreport.pdf>)

A criticism remains, however, that truth commissions often fail to adequately inform children of the outcomes of their contributions, which undermines both their agency and the democratic legitimacy of the reconciliation process (see Mollica, 2023). Mollica has found, for instance, that out of 52 TRCs since the 1970s, only Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste, and Canada have produced child-accessible reports. Most TRCs do not fulfil their reciprocal obligation to report back to children in meaningful ways. Against this backdrop, the more recent example of Colombia demonstrates a particularly creative and impactful approach to outreach. The CEV published a dedicated volume on children and adolescents, highlighting how the conflict affected them. It analysed 2,744 testimonies related to under-18s, with 1,601 from direct victims. This publication used a literary rather than academic style to preserve the authenticity of children's voices and emotional impact. It included 200 narrative testimonies, anonymised and publicly accessible. The CEV innovatively published its final report in digital and multimedia formats to improve access for younger audiences.

☰
**HAY FUTURO SI HAY VERDAD**
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### Boys, Girls and Adolescents

Contents with subtitling/translation

☛ Three generations in the midst of war  
**Memory as resistance**  
Young people have concerns about the places they live in, and some are becoming leaders, in areas devastated by conflict; young people remember and try to redefine their territory to overcome the ravages of war.

☛ Three generations in the midst of war  
**Leaving the territory to save your life**  
As they grow up, displaced adolescents establish new connections with their surroundings, allowing them to participate in other social spaces. Many even become leaders in their communities...

☛ Three generations in the midst of war  
**Studying under an armed regime**  
In addition to occupying and destroying educational institutions, armed groups also founded their own schools, seeking social legitimacy and indoctrinating and controlling the population. This was the case of the Villanueva High School, founded by Fidel Castaño in 1988, where...

☛ Three generations in the midst of war  
**Robinson's Nightmare**  
All armed actors were responsible, to varying degrees, for recruiting children and adolescents to the war. Upon recruitment, they were at risk of death, illness, and punishment.

☛ Three generations in the midst of war  
**Being a girl in the guerrilla**  
The recruited girls and adolescents were victims of harassment, rape, forced abortion, forced contraception, and other forms of sexual violence during their time in the ranks. These traumatic events, which they recall with pain, left lasting impacts...

☛ Three generations in the midst of war  
**They took him away deceived**  
Armed groups used force, deception, and persuasion to recruit children and adolescents. Often, they promised to improve their living conditions by offering them education, work, or assistance for their families.

Figure 2: Comisión de la Verdad Colombia Digital Resource (<https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/>)

The platform includes interactive elements, videos, and story-driven content more accessible to youth. In addition, the CEV has adopted a range of additional measures to help disseminate its findings to children and young people (see box 8).

## Box 8: Inclusive Outreach

This initiative is part of the CEV's Pedagogical Strategy under the broader Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición (SIVJRNR). It brings together educators, students, artists, and communities across Colombia to collectively design educational tools that foster critical engagement with the country's conflict, promote the value of truth, and reinforce the goal of non-repetition.

### Objectives and Context

- ▶ Purpose: Equip educational spaces with tools that help students and communities understand the meaning of truth in Colombia's armed conflict, reconnect with their recent history, and build resilience against forgetting.
- ▶ Strategic Framing: Part of the Commission's efforts to stimulate social mobilisation, deepen memory, and embed truth into civic practice under the "Generación V" initiative.

### Methodology and Co Creation Labs

- ▶ Collaborative Process: Dozens of virtual and in-person co creation sessions engaged teachers, secondary and university students, journalists, artists, and community cultural groups .
- ▶ Structured Workshops: Early events in August 2020 brought together diverse voices—led by Commissioners—to encourage creative collaboration in producing education materials rooted in truth and memory.
- ▶ Inclusive Design: The labs emphasised the involvement of different regions and community settings, forming a nationwide practice community aligned with the Commission's mandate.

### Tools and Outputs

The labs produced a toolkit of "Tongas de la Memoria", innovative pedagogical modules themed around elements such as writing, textiles, ancestral medicine, gastronomy, and visual arts. Each module includes:

1. Conceptual definitions

2. Participant reflections by educators and learners
3. Step by step [implementation guides](#) structured around phases: before, during, and after the activity.

Additional components from the [CEV's pedagogy collection](#) include dialogue guides, digital platform activities, curricula for schools, and practice toolkits like "La Mochila de Molano".

#### **Intended Impact**

- ▶ Social appropriation of truth: Mobilise citizens to actively engage with and understand [the conflict's truths and their consequences](#).
- ▶ Public memory and learning: Embed the Commission's findings into classroom and community narratives, fostering [collective responsibility against future conflict](#).
- ▶ Non repetition through pedagogy: Through dialogue, creative expression, and shared learning, the initiative seeks to transform how people perceive historical memory and the value of peace .

The "Declaring Truth to War and Forgetting" project represents a robust, participatory approach to teaching recent conflict through co created, culturally relevant tools. By uniting communities, educators, and youth in designing hands-on pedagogical strategies, the Commission's effort contributes to embedding truth in public memory, reinforcing respectful dialogue, and laying groundwork for lasting peace.

#### *Summary*

While many TRCs have fallen short in meaningfully engaging children, innovative models demonstrate that participation can be safe, ethical, and impactful. When children are included as co-creators—through accessible formats and inclusive platforms—the process of truth-seeking becomes more legitimate and representative of lived realities.

## Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Engaging children in transitional justice processes, such as truth commissions, is essential for acknowledging their experiences and ensuring their voices contribute to historical truth and healing. However, this participation also raises complex challenges, particularly around ethics and protection. Balancing the child's right to be heard with the need to safeguard their physical and emotional well-being requires careful planning, specialised approaches, and ongoing support. This section explores the key ethical dilemmas, cultural and legal barriers, and the importance of inclusivity and diversity in designing child-centred transitional justice mechanisms, drawing on examples from various truth commissions to illustrate best practices and persistent challenges.

### Ethical and Protection Considerations

While involving children in truth commissions is vital for recognising their experiences and rights, it raises significant ethical and protection challenges that must be carefully managed. Participation in truth recovery processes, some note, 'may raise difficult topics, especially amongst victim communities' (Ramírez-Barat, 2012). The potentially dangerous and counterproductive effects of participation often stand in direct contrast to how participation more generally is presented across multiple bodies of literature. As Brounéus assesses, '[t]he underlying assumption in much of the peacebuilding literature, as in political rhetoric, is that truth-telling is cathartic or healing thereby advance reconciliation' (Brounéus, 2008). However, based on research with women genocide survivors who have given testimony in the process in Rwanda, Brounéus identified several risks, including insecurity, as a result of the truth-telling process (Ibid.). The literature on child participation in truth recovery processes reflects similar concerns (Ladisch and Ramirez-Barat, 2010). In relation to the South African TRC, Sameer and Zvobgo document how, on advice from local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with children, the South African commission itself decided to not take statements from persons under the age of 18 (Rana and Zvobgo, 2021). One primary concern is the risk of re-traumatisation. Sharing painful memories of violence, loss, or abuse can trigger distress or psychological harm if not handled sensitively. Therefore, participation must be strictly voluntary, with children fully informed about the purpose, potential risks, and limits of their involvement. Ensuring informed consent (or assent, depending on the child's age and maturity) is essential, as is obtaining permission from guardians when appropriate, to uphold children's autonomy while respecting family and cultural contexts.

Another critical issue is confidentiality and anonymity. Truth commissions often deal with sensitive information that could expose children to retaliation, stigma, or social exclusion if identities or testimonies are disclosed. Robust measures must be in place to protect participants' privacy and prevent any form of harm resulting from their participation. Truth commissions must also adopt a trauma-informed approach, integrating psychosocial support before, during, and after children's engagement. Access to trained mental health professionals and referral pathways for ongoing care is necessary to support children's well-being. Facilitators need specialised training to recognise signs of distress, respond appropriately, and create safe, child-friendly environments where children feel comfortable sharing their stories. Lastly, children's right to withdraw from the process at any time without consequences must be clearly communicated and respected, ensuring that participation is never coercive (Ladisch and Ramirez-Barat, 2010: 3). Balancing these ethical and protection concerns is crucial to creating participatory mechanisms that empower children while safeguarding their physical and emotional safety throughout the truth-seeking process.

## Box 9: Ethical Approaches to Child Participation

The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) took a number of deliberate steps to ensure that child participation was safe, ethical, and meaningful. These steps were developed with guidance from UNICEF and other child protection agencies. Here's a summary of the key strategies and measures used:

### Confidentiality and Protection

- ▶ The TRC committed to maintaining confidentiality for all child participants, ensuring that their identities would remain protected throughout the process.
- ▶ In-camera hearings (private sessions) were held for children under 18 and for victims of sexual violence to avoid re-traumatisation and preserve privacy.

### Collaboration with Child Protection Agencies

- ▶ The TRC signed an agreement with UNICEF and Child Protection Agencies (CPAs) in 2002 to provide technical assistance and emotional support throughout statement-taking and hearings.
- ▶ CPAs conducted vulnerability and safety assessments for all children slated to testify. Participation only proceeded with child assent and parental/guardian approval, ensuring voluntariness and informed consent.

### Trauma-Sensitive Methodology

- ▶ TRC staff received specialised training in taking testimonies from children, especially those who had been combatants or victims of sexual violence.
- ▶ Counsellors were available during and after testimony to offer psychological support and follow-up care to monitor for adverse impacts.

### Child-Centred Outputs

- ▶ The TRC committed to producing a "child-friendly" version of the final report to make the findings accessible to younger audiences.
- ▶ Disaggregated data was collected specifically on children and sexual violence victims, and a dedicated chapter on children was included in the final report.

*(Sources: Ladisch and Ramirez-Barat, 2010)*

## Cultural and Legal Barriers

In many societies, children are viewed as subordinate to adults and unqualified to speak on public matters. These cultural norms, coupled with adult-centric institutional structures, often result in tokenistic engagement or the complete exclusion of children's perspectives. For example, the so-called developmental view of the child (Tobin, 2013) considers childhood to be a purely biological process. Whilst on the journey towards adulthood, children undergo a period of socialisation or a growth towards autonomy. During this time, children are regarded as 'passive, dependent and waiting-to-be-adults' (Abebe, 2013: 74-75) with the status of the incompetent child marked by 'not-yet-being' (Reynaert et al., 2009: 521). Conversely, an alternative understanding of childhood considers children as social actors, as active agents and autonomous, independent human beings in constructing their lives (Ibid.). For many, understanding childhood as a sociological construct rather than a biological fact is a more appropriate and accurate reflection of the role that children play in many societies (Cormier and Rossi, 2023; James and Prout, 1990). Indeed, perhaps nowhere is children's agency more identifiable than in conflict-affected settings. In these contexts, children are actively negotiating their own best interests, protection and well-being (Zariff, 2019). The approach adopted by truth commissions can have a significant bearing on which ideas around childhood take precedence; a TRC that promotes and facilitates child participation can represent a more nuanced and progressive understanding about childhood and children's agency. That is, child participation in truth commissions reflects children's agency by recognising them not just as passive victims but as individuals capable of contributing to truth telling, justice and healing processes.

Legal barriers to participation further compounded the marginalisation of children, restricting their ability to exercise agency and be recognised as rights-holders in both formal and informal systems. For example, age-based legal definitions often exclude children from providing testimony or participating in public hearings, limiting their ability to contribute to truth-seeking processes. In some cases, procedural rules may require parental or guardian consent for children to participate, which can be particularly problematic when those guardians are implicated in violence or abuse. Additionally, legal systems may lack child-friendly mechanisms for testimony, such as protective measures during hearings or alternatives to public appearances, further discouraging children from engaging. These constraints can result in the silencing of child victims and witnesses in truth commissions, preventing the acknowledgment of violations they experienced and impeding a comprehensive understanding of the conflict's impact.

The Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) highlighted the subordination of children:

- ▶ [...] legal traditions that so far had not allowed children to be considered fully equal citizens and holders of individual rights are deeply rooted in the country's sociocultural traditions.
- ▶ [...] Traditional societies tend to reinforce existing social hierarchies, in which children are located at the very bottom, and girls even further down in the hierarchy than boys ([Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), Volume Three, at 20).

Legal frameworks may lack provisions to accommodate children's participation or may impose age-related restrictions that inadvertently silence them.

### **The Child Youth Continuum**

Another key challenge in including children in transitional justice processes lies in navigating the blurred boundary between childhood and youth (Ladisch and Ramirez-Barat, 2010: 10). Legally, childhood ends at 18, but cultural and contextual definitions of "youth" vary widely, often extending into the mid-20s or beyond.

## Box 10: Definitions of Children and Youth

Article 1, UN [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

**For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.**

United Nations (2007). [World Youth Report 2007: Young People's Transition to Adulthood – Progress and Challenges](#). United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). [ST/ESA/313]

**The United Nations defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24**

[African Union \(2006\). African Youth Charter](#), Article 1.

**For the purposes of this Charter, youth or young people shall refer to every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years.**

This creates complications for truth commissions, especially when there is a delay between the time violations occur and when transitional justice mechanisms are implemented. Many individuals who were victimised as children may legally be adults by the time these processes begin, yet they still carry the specific vulnerabilities and long-term impacts of childhood harm. If truth commissions only recognise individuals under 18 at the time of their operations, they risk excluding those most affected by early-life violations.

To address this, transitional justice efforts must adopt a context-sensitive approach that focuses on individuals' age at the time the harm occurred—not just their legal status during the justice process. The Colombian Truth Commission (CEV) took an innovative approach in this regard by engaging with adults who had been children during the armed conflict, recognising that their testimonies could still provide essential insights into the child-specific impacts of violence. This strategy allowed the Commission to capture children's perspectives retroactively, ensuring a more complete and representative account of the conflict's intergenerational effects.

## Inclusivity and Diversity

Children are not a homogenous group, and participatory mechanisms in truth commissions must be designed to reflect the full range of their identities and experiences. A failure to account for differences in age, gender, disability status, ethnicity, language, and roles in conflict risks reinforcing the very exclusions and inequalities that transitional justice processes are meant to address. Children experience conflict in diverse ways: some may be direct victims of violence, others conscripted as combatants, while many are affected by displacement, loss of family members, or sexual exploitation. Their ability to participate meaningfully in truth-telling processes depends not only on their age and cognitive development but also on whether these processes are responsive to their social and cultural realities.

Truth commissions that have taken a more progressive approach have recognised this diversity and attempted to adapt accordingly. The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission stands out in this regard. It developed child-specific participation procedures in partnership with UNICEF and local child protection agencies, ensuring that children's involvement was safe, voluntary, and inclusive. Significantly, the Commission recognised the different needs of girls, particularly those who had been victims of sexual violence or forced marriage and created safe spaces and confidential hearings where their experiences could be acknowledged without re-traumatisation or public exposure. Similarly, the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission made efforts to disaggregate children's experiences, holding separate consultations with girls and boys and including the voices of former child soldiers, street children, and children from rural and indigenous communities. By producing a child-friendly version of its report and incorporating children's narratives into the broader truth-seeking process, the Commission acknowledged that children's stories are not ancillary, but essential to understanding the full impact of conflict. These examples illustrate that when truth commissions are intentional about engaging with the diversity among children, they can avoid the pitfalls of one-size-fits-all approaches and instead contribute to a more inclusive and just historical record. Meaningful participation requires not just allowing children to speak but creating structures that listen carefully to who they are and how they are differently positioned within systems of violence and inequality.

It is important to recognise that every TRC operates within a unique historical, cultural, and political context, with children experiencing distinct forms of harm—ranging from forced recruitment and sexual violence to cultural erasure and displacement—requiring tailored approaches to truth-seeking and redress.

### Types of Children to Include

Effective child participation in transitional justice must be inclusive and reach all groups of children affected by conflict, especially those who face additional vulnerabilities or marginalisation. This ensures that the diverse experiences and needs of children are recognised and addressed. Key groups include:

- ▶ Children formerly associated with armed forces or groups.
- ▶ Displaced, refugee, or stateless children.
- ▶ Children detained during the conflict.
- ▶ Those born as a result of wartime sexual violence.
- ▶ Children with physical or intellectual disabilities.
- ▶ Children from minority ethnic, religious, or linguistic communities.
- ▶ LGBTQ+ youth and gender-diverse children.
- ▶ Children impacted by gender-based violence.

Recognising and including this diversity is crucial to ensuring that truth recovery processes capture the full range of children's experiences and the different ways conflict impacts their lives. By embracing varied perspectives, transitional justice mechanisms can more accurately document violations, tailor reparative measures, and promote healing that is truly representative and equitable for all affected children.

### Designing for Diverse Childhoods

In transitional justice processes, particularly truth commissions, participation mechanisms must be intentionally designed to reflect the complex and varied realities of childhood. Recognising that children are not a uniform group, these mechanisms should be tailored to accommodate differences in age, ability, gender identity, and geographic location—ensuring that all children are not only heard, but meaningfully included.

Age-appropriate engagement is essential. Children's cognitive and emotional capacities differ greatly across developmental stages, and so truth-seeking bodies must use tools and approaches suited to each age group. For example, creative methods such as storytelling, drawing, and play therapy may be more effective for younger children, while adolescents might be engaged through structured dialogues or youth forums that allow for critical reflection and direct testimony. Disability inclusion is another vital consideration. Children with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities often face systemic barriers to participation. Inclusive mechanisms should therefore include assistive technologies, accessible communication formats (such as Braille, sign language, or pictorial materials), and facilitation practices that allow for equal participation. Without these, children with disabilities remain excluded from processes that claim to be universal and restorative. Participation must also be gender-responsive. Girls and LGBTQ+ youth may encounter heightened risks of violence, stigma, or cultural silencing. Truth commissions must ensure safe, affirming environments where these children feel protected in sharing their experiences, particularly in relation to sexual and gender-based violence. Gender-responsive approaches also involve training staff on sensitivity, ensuring privacy, and recognising the intersecting forms of marginalisation that can inhibit participation.

Geographic diversity further shapes access and inclusion. Children living in rural or conflict-affected areas often lack the infrastructure, mobility, or institutional presence that would enable them to engage with national truth processes. In Colombia, the Truth Commission (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad) made a concerted effort to address this by establishing regional offices and deploying mobile units to engage children and youth in remote and marginalised communities. Working with local organisations, the Commission held child- and youth-centred dialogues, ensuring that those most impacted by armed conflict—including Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and campesino children—were included in shaping the historical narrative. Materials were translated into local languages, and methodologies were adapted to the cultural norms and communication styles of each community. The Colombian case demonstrates that designing for diverse childhoods requires more than procedural fairness; it demands a deliberate and sustained effort to dismantle barriers to participation. In doing so, truth commissions not only fulfil their mandate to account for the past but also model the inclusive values needed for future peace.

## Relevant Transitional Justice Issues

Transitional justice mechanisms must specifically address the unique and severe harms experienced by children during conflict to ensure comprehensive accountability and healing. These child-specific violations include:

- ▶ Forced recruitment and military exploitation.
- ▶ Sexual abuse, including rape and sexual slavery.
- ▶ Displacement, loss of caregivers, or community.
- ▶ Physical and psychological torture.
- ▶ Detention without due process.
- ▶ Attacks on or militarisation of schools.
- ▶ Family separation or loss of civil documentation.

In addition to the physical impacts of conflict on children, which are by now well-known, the range of socioeconomic harms that children suffer prior to, during, and sometimes after conflict is often overlooked. Tackling socioeconomic harms creates space for child participation by allowing children to share a fuller picture of how these harms arise during conflict and how they specifically affect young people. Indeed, similar arguments are often made in terms of why it is necessary for transitional justice to address both child participation and socioeconomic harms. Scholars contend that including socioeconomic harms as part of a truth commission's mandate uncovers a more holistic truth (Sharp, 2014); if socio-economic issues are not discussed and addressed, only half of the story is told. This omission, according to Sharp, 'shapes a distorted and one-dimensional narrative of conflict' (Ibid., 11). Lackey contends that transitional justice is a 'powerful way to describe the real human impact of abuses (Albin-Lackey, 2014: 139). To this end and relatedly, those advocating for child participation highlight that they 'hold a unique view of what happened and can inform the work of TJ measures' (Ramírez-Barat, 2012: 11). First-hand accounts are said to support a comprehensive framework for relief and redress (Rana and Zvobgo, 2021: 282–303). By contrast, Bisset (2016: 494) notes that: Without the inclusion and consultation of children in transitional programmes, an incomplete account of the nature and impact of the violations suffered by children and how best to address them will be recorded. Alongside civil and political rights violations, truth commissions addressing socioeconomic harms enable children to document how conflict has led to conflagrations of their economic, social and cultural rights (Emeziem, 2021).

As the TRC Report in Colombia documented:

[N]arrating what happened to girls, boys and adolescents during the war involves going through a chain of violent events that, in general, originated in a context of precarious life: places where there is no access to health, education or basic services to live and grow in a dignified manner, and where the law of the strongest is established, because even the State, when it is present, almost always does so through public force (page 24).

These rights, which are essential for the well-being and dignity of individuals, include access to food, water, shelter, healthcare, education and the ability to work and provide for oneself and one's family (Boyle, 2017).

### *Summary*

Child participation must be grounded in ethical safeguards, trauma-informed approaches, and inclusive strategies that account for age, ability, identity, and context. Ensuring safety and dignity is not only a moral imperative but a prerequisite for genuine engagement.

## Recommendations

### **For Mediators and Conflict Parties (during peace talks):**

1. **Institutionalise Child Participation in TRCs:** Ensure TRC mandates explicitly reference children, with age-appropriate and trauma-informed modalities written into agreements.
2. **Embed Child Participation in Peace Agreements and National Policies:** Incorporate child participation clauses in ceasefire agreements, peace accords, and governance frameworks, supported by dedicated funding.

### **For the United Nations and International Partners (e.g. UNICEF, OHCHR):**

3. **Design Inclusive and Ethical Participation Mechanisms:** Provide technical guidance and monitoring to ensure voluntary participation, confidentiality, psychosocial support, and safeguarding.
4. **Invest in Capacity-Building and Partnerships:** Channel resources to local child protection agencies, educators, and NGOs to co-design, implement, and monitor child-friendly TRC mechanisms.

### **For National Governments (post-conflict):**

5. **Create Child-Accessible Outputs and Feedback Loops:** Produce child-friendly versions of TRC reports using creative and digital tools and establish mechanisms to close the loop with child contributors.
6. **Address Socioeconomic Harms and Structural Injustice:** Expand reparations and transitional justice to address children's access to education, health, and livelihoods—not only civil and political rights.

### **For NGOs and Civil Society Organisations:**

7. **Recognise Diverse Childhoods in Transitional Justice:** Advocate for and document the experiences of vulnerable groups—former child soldiers, displaced children, LGBTQ+ youth, children with disabilities—ensuring their perspectives inform TRCs.

8. **Promote Intergenerational and Retrospective Testimonies:** Facilitate safe spaces for adults to reflect on their experiences as children during conflict, broadening truth-seeking to capture long-term impacts.
9. **Foster Pedagogical and Community Ownership of Truth:** Support community-based education programs (e.g., Colombia's Tongas de la Memoria) to embed truth-telling in civic life and intergenerational learning.

## Useful Resources

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## About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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