

THE ITALIAN MODEL OF CHILD PARTICIPATION. AN OVERVIEW

The reported study was funded by RFBR and EISR according to the research project № 19-011-31111

Tolvašis Leonas, Phd, Professor, Faculty of Diplomacy and Security, Union Nikola Tesla University (Belgrade, Serbia)
E-mail: leonas.tolvaisis@gmail.com

Abstract. The paper presents a brief overview of the Italian model of child participation. It lists the main forms of child participation in Italy and the contribution of the Italian model to the global practice of child participation. It concludes by enumerating the shortcomings and development prospects of the Italian model.

Keywords: child participation, children and youth policy of Italy

Аннотация. В статье представлен краткий обзор итальянской модели участия детей. В ней перечислены основные формы участия детей в Италии, дана оценка вклада итальянской модели в глобальную практику участия детей. В заключение приведены недостатки и перспективы развития итальянской модели.

Ключевые слова: участие детей, детская и молодежная политика в Италии

The Italian model of child participation draws on the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It implies institutionalised rights to participation in civic life and in decision-making. Child participation is considered an inherent element of Italian political culture [1, 359]. Children are regarded as a public good, and, accordingly, child participation is seen as a means of overcoming low birth rates and social alienation and contributing to the preservation of family and fostering social solidarity [1, 366-367].

Italy has particularly rich experience of child participation in creative sphere, decision-making, associations and projecting. Three main areas of child participation in Italy include: 1) play, leisure and self-expression; 2) project activities and 3) civic associations, youth councils and fora [2, 38]. The right of children to be heard is particularly implemented in court proceedings.

A firm foundation for child participation was established by the law no. 285/1997 on the expansion of rights and opportunities of children and adolescents. Drawing on the Convention, the law aimed to promote children's rights, improve their natural and urban environment, well-being and quality of life [3, art. 3.1]. The article 7 foresaw joint planning and communal child councils as the main forms of child participation in decision-making on political, professional and local community levels. The law also set child participation trends in projects related to urban restructuring and research on children's needs. The law paved the way for child participation in decision-making in various areas of

public policy, making up and implementing projects. It gave a significant contribution in terms of cognitive socialisation experience.

In Italy, the concept of child participation develops in the following fields: family, school, peer groups, educational, sports, cultural, social and ecologic associations, representation in local authorities, mass media and virtual space. The main directions of implementation of the child's right to be heard include consulting (through children's fora), participation in management (communal and provincial child councils) and participation at school.

Participation through play, leisure and self-expression implies asking child opinions by means of focus groups organised as role plays. Leisure projects aim at expanding access to public spaces for children's meetings and interaction.

The concept of child participation in project activities draws on the recognition of children as a group that is the most disadvantaged by urban development. Spending most of their time in closed spaces, children have their activities organised and controlled by adults, and their mobility and discovery of new spaces limited. Child participation is thus seen as an impetus for real change: a child-friendly city is regarded friendly for all citizens. The urban planning philosophy of "children's city", an initiative developed since the late 1990s, motivates city authorities to restore urban spaces as channels of communication and exchange [6].

Child participation in urban planning, an approach born in Italy, implies inclusion of children in urban restructuring activities together with architects, urbanists and environmentalists. Children provide ideas and suggestions, interpret the needs of local communities and take part in drafting creative projects that are then implemented by adult experts. Child ideas are taken into consideration; children are vested with real responsibilities [6]. The cities of Empoli, Fano, as well as a number of cities of the Emilia-Romagna region provide examples of child participation in urban development.

In developing the approach of "strong participation", implying an efficient role of children in projecting urban spaces or directing cultural events, the position of local administrations that empower minor citizens has strengthened over the past three decades. Networks of associations that share a specific culture of childhood have been developing. Italian networks of educational cities, sustainable children's cities and child-friendly cities promote opportunities for participation of children and youth, child autonomy, safety and involvement in urban reconstruction.

In Italy, child participation in families is particularly developed, compared to school and leisure participation. Family is an important factor of children's prosocial behaviour, such as organised volunteering.

The Statute of Secondary School Students adopted by the presidential decree no. 249/1998 (amended by the presidential decree no. 235/2007) set the norms of school autonomy and a framework for interaction between students and other stakeholders within the school community [4]. Drawing on the Constitution of Italy and the Convention, the Statute established freedom of self-

expression, thought, consciousness, religion and respect for dignity of all people regardless of age and social status. The rights of students to participate in the life of educational institutions and to express their views in decision-making are guaranteed by articles 2.4 and 5.

The presidential decree no. 567/1996 (amended in 1999 and in 2005) established provincial student councils, an institution of student representation on the provincial level [5]. Student representatives are elected by all students of a school. Provincial councils have headquarters and funds that can only be spent in the interests of students represented by the given council.

Since the early 1980s, child participation in Italy also took the shape of educational projects termed “street work” and encompassing a variety of approaches and practices: 1) communication and leisure of adolescents and risk groups; 2) prevention of deviation and marginalisation; 3) social and political participation; and 4) managing local community problems, self-organisation skills and interaction with institutions [2, 23].

Local and regional authorities play a key role in promoting child participation, as these are the closest decision-making levels to children that can offer them real participation experience. Most regional statutes were adopted in 1970s, i.e., before the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Still, a number of Italian regional laws established regional monitoring institutions on children and youth. Communal child councils spread in Italy in the mid-1980s from France. Child councils developed out of project systems defined jointly by municipalities, schools, parents and territorial educational agencies. Several regions also established offices of ombudspersons for children and youth.

An important dimension of child participation in Italy is children’s involvement in the work of associations that aim at developing skills of decision-making, management and experience evaluation. A number of networks of local authorities and NGOs active in Italy make part of respective international organisations: “Save the Children”, “Pidida” (Coordinamento per i diritti dell’infanzia e dell’adolescenza), International Association of Educative Cities (AICE), as well as local associations, such as “Camina”, “Democrazia in erba”, “Albachiara”, etc. Standards of child media are promoted by the Union of Journalists of Italy. Italy has a long tradition of children’s professional mass media and cinema events (Giffoni film festival since 1971).

Since the early 1990s, institutional framework of child participation in Italy has seen a continuous expansion. It involved state, local authorities, educational and health care institutions and civil society in legislative, practical and strategic processes. Still, there are persisting shortcomings in the implementation of child’s right to be heard in numerous contexts. Investments, resource distribution, access and actors’ involvement differ across regions and fields of activity. A comprehensive strategy of child participation is missing. The law 285/97 paved the way to an experimental stage that did not result in all-encompassing child participation policy. As a result, competences remained fragmented and institutions lacked coordination [2, 51].

In its latest report on Italy (February 2019), the Committee on the Rights of the Child stressed the need to ensure child participation in planning and implementing programs in spheres affecting children, to strengthen the role of the National Observatory on Children and Adolescents in coordinating all the relevant ministries and provide it with necessary resources [7]. The Committee also recommended integrating and ensuring equal implementation of the principle of the best interest of the child in all Italian regions, in all legislative, administrative and judicial procedures, with regard to unaccompanied children in particular. Beside the need to elaborate professional procedures and criteria of defining the best interests of the child, the Committee also recommended to adopt a legislative provision establishing universal standards for the right of the child to be heard regardless of the age, disability or other contextual criteria, and to ensure that children’s views would be taken into consideration according to their age and maturity. Besides, standard tools for extensive child consultations on all state policies affecting them and institutionalisation of regular sessions of communal child councils are also recommended for national legislative process.

References:

1. Woodhouse B. B. (2014) Listening to Children: Participation Rights of Minors in Italy and the United States // *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*. - Vol. 36. - No. 4. – Pp. 358–369.
2. Osservatorio nazionale per l’infanzia e l’adolescenza. Gruppo di lavoro sull’partecipazione. Il diritto all’partecipazione e ad un ambiente a misura di bambino. - Roma: Osservatorio nazionale per l’infanzia e l’adolescenza, 2009. – URL: <http://unipd-centrodirittumani.it/public/docs/lav1.pdf>.
3. Legge n. 285 (28 agosto 1997). “Disposizioni per la promozione di diritti e di opportunità per l’infanzia e l’adolescenza” // *Gazzetta Ufficiale* n. 207, 5 settembre 1997.
4. Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica n. 249 (24 giugno 1998). Regolamento recante lo statuto delle studentesse e degli studenti della scuola secondaria // *Gazzetta Ufficiale* n. 175 del 29/07/1998.
5. Decreto della Presidente della Repubblica n. 567 (10 ottobre 1996). Regolamento recante la disciplina delle iniziative complementari e delle attività integrative nelle istituzioni scolastiche // *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 5 novembre 1996, n. 259.
6. Francis M. and Lorenzo R. Seven Realms of Children’s Participation // *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2002) 22/ Pp. 157-169.
7. Comitato sui diritti dell’infanzia (2019). Osservazioni conclusive al quinto e sesto rapporto periodico dell’Italia. – URL: http://unicef.it/Allegati/Osservazioni_Conclusive_CRC_Italia_2019.pdf