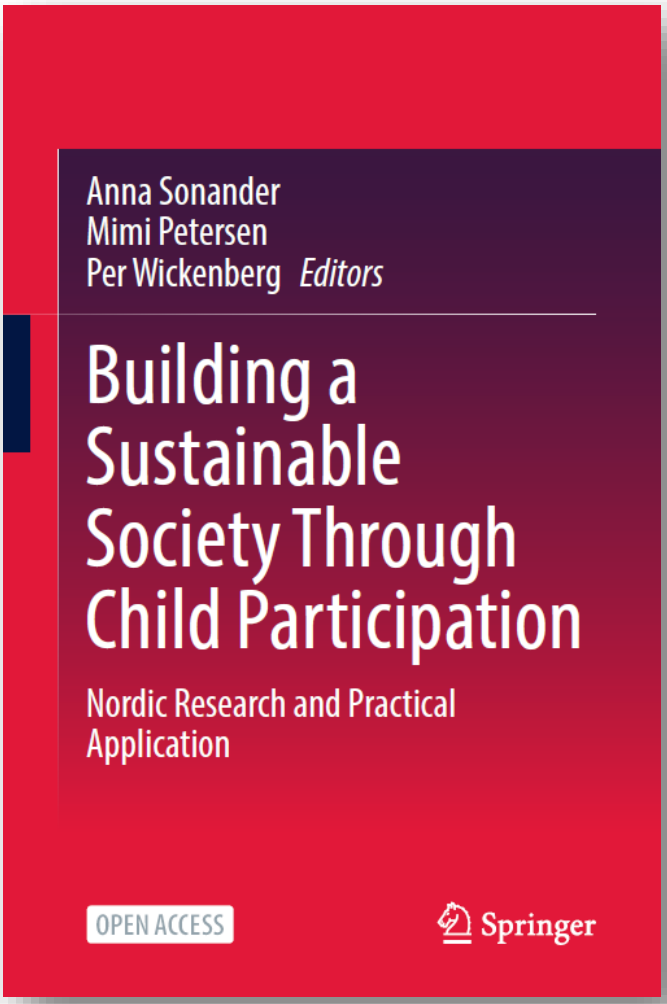

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Foreword By Harry Shier

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Editors

Building a Sustainable Society Through Child Participation

Nordic Research and Practical Application

Springer

Foreword

As I sit down to write this foreword, I am able to look back on over 30 years of advocacy, activism, and more recently, scholarship in the struggle for children's rights. In fact, I started my career in the field of children's play (Shier, 1984), and when I discovered children's rights in the early 90s, my initial guiding star was Article 31 of the UNCRC—the child's right to play (Shier, 1995). It didn't take long, however, for me to understand the importance of the child's right to be heard and taken into account in decision-making—Article 12—as an underpinning principle (Lansdown, 2011). Since then, while I have continued to support children in defending and advocating for their right to play, the right to be heard has been the main focus of my work, from grassroots activism to education and research.

Though I was born in Ireland, from 1976 until 2000 I lived and worked in England. Then, in 2001, I moved to Nicaragua in Central America, where for eleven years I lived and worked among child workers and their families on the region's coffee plantations. This involved coming to terms with profoundly different social, cultural, and economic realities, and alongside these, an alternative approach to children's rights (Shier, 2010a).

In 2012, I returned to my native land, where I obtained a PhD in children's rights (Shier, 2016) and, until my retirement, continued to work on a variety of national and international child participation initiatives.

I mention this personal history, because I believe it gives me a unique overview of the extraordinary transformations that have taken place in those thirty years. In the 1990s, child participation was a niche topic, understood by few, ignored by most, with a tiny practice base and a negligible research literature. It has been a long road, but today child participation is global and mainstream. As this volume shows, it is part of education, part of social services, the justice and courts systems, health care, early years education and care, research, and more. It has a large and fast-growing literature, both practical and scholarly, and is backed by legislative, policy, and practice frameworks on every continent.

In any analysis of these global transformations, it will be evident that the Nordic countries of Europe stand out as leaders and exemplars. In these countries we see both the range and quality of social and public services available to children and

families, supportive policy frameworks, and increasingly the embedding of rights-based perspectives, so that the enactment of the right to be heard can lead to genuinely transformative participation. This book contains many such examples.

As the authors of this collection do not hesitate to point out, there are many gaps: failures to engage, misunderstandings, conflicts, exclusions, power imbalances, resource misallocations, and so on. But when the authors focus on these challenges, I suggest that this too is to be welcomed as part of our continuing journey. As this collection shows, we are achieving an understanding of the complexity of participation. We have moved a long way beyond simply hearing children's voices, so that today we insist that their participation should be not just meaningful and effective but—in the words of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child—transparent, informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe, sensitive to risk, and accountable, (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). And, of course, when we apply these criteria to our daily reality, it throws into sharp perspective the challenges that we might have missed before, and the barriers that still persist. With this growing understanding, we can set our sights on the road to continuing improvement.

This collection, therefore, is to be welcomed, not only for its panoramic overview of what has been achieved in the Nordic countries, but for its insights into the real-life complexity of the topic, and as a call to action on the remaining challenges and barriers.

The editors have already provided an excellent introduction that summarises the structure and content of the collection, which I don't need to duplicate here. So instead, I'd rather use this opportunity to draw your attention to some of that real-life complexity and the corresponding challenges facing both scholars and practitioners.

The first of these, which appears in different guises throughout the collection, is the complex relationship between child participation and child protection. The notion that a choice has to be made between one or the other—and you can't have both—now seems simplistic and obsolete. The consensus in this collection seems to be that, rather than a conflict, the relationship between participation and protection is more like a balancing act, where one seeks an equilibrium with just the right amount of each. As I have written previously

> Where children want to speak out about an issue that is of concern to them, and there is a potential risk of adverse consequences, it is the duty of the responsible adults to find a safe alternative, managing the risks so that children can be protected from harm without having their voices silenced and their right to speak violated. (Shier, 2023, p. 99)

In other words, there is no choice to be made between participation and protection, but a duty to find solutions that recognise and uphold both as human rights.

But here I want to suggest another way of seeing this relationship. When we commit to upholding both the right to be heard and the right to be safe, we should not be performing a balancing act, but rather building on the positive synergy that connects the two. As a rule, when children speak out on issues that concern them, rather than suffering harm as a result, they contribute to their own safeguarding,

whether by empowering themselves, defending their rights, raising adult awareness, or all three (Križ & Petersen, 2023). With this collection, we leave behind the old idea of "Participation versus Protection" and embrace the idea of *protection through participation*.

A second, related idea I want to highlight here is the complex relationship between participation and vulnerability. There is a general consensus that those who are vulnerable are entitled to be protected. However, despite new thinking on "protection through participation", as mentioned above, when it comes to children labelled as "vulnerable", the older view that the need for protection somehow trumps the right to speak out and be heard is stubbornly persistent. This idea is particularly tenacious in academic research, where universities' ethical guidance typically insists on the importance of child protection while ignoring the child's right to speak and be heard (Robinson, 2024), thus letting the ethicality of silencing children in situations of vulnerability go unquestioned.

In the NGO/civil society sector, on the other hand, the opposite view is increasingly heard. Here, it is widely understood that children living in vulnerable and precarious circumstances are those we most need to engage in research, advocacy, and activism. They are the ones who have the most to contribute, and who will benefit most from transformative participation initiatives (Garcia-Quiroga & Salvo Agoglia, 2020).

Reading the chapters of this collection suggests that we can find both approaches thriving in public services across the Nordic countries. While there are still those who feel adults should decide where and when it is appropriate to hear children's voices (and which children's views should be heard), there are many who recognise that the UNCRC gives *all* children, including the marginalised, vulnerable, and at risk, the right to express their views *on all matters that affect them*. For adults to pick and choose those occasions when children will be listened to—based on perceived vulnerability or any other grounds—is clearly a human rights violation.

As you read these chapters, a third complex relationship I urge you to consider is that between participation, age, and maturity. Article 12 of the UNCRC says that children's expressed views must be given due weight "according to the age and maturity of the child". In this book, the editors focus on this as a key theme, and their analysis leads them to conclude that these criteria of age and maturity are dependent on adults' interpretations (or misinterpretations), which result in the child's right to be heard being treated as a "conditional right"—a right that needs only be upheld where adults in positions of power deem the child or children in question to have sufficient age and maturity.

But, as with the other complexities discussed above, there are alternative ways to address this issue, and these can be seen in various chapters throughout the collection. The first thing to clarify is that children's rights are universal, not conditional. And this applies unreservedly to the child's right to be heard and for their views to be given due weight. These rights apply to all children *from birth.* Article 12 has no requirement that children should communicate their views in any officially sanctioned way, and the same rights belong to children who do not speak at all.

Thus, it is not the prerogative of adults to decide which children are old enough, mature enough, or articulate enough to have their views given due weight. All children's views must be given due weight.

Understanding the meaning of Article 12 in this way allows us to reconfigure the role of adult decision-makers in relation to children's age and maturity. In facilitating participatory processes, our role is not to decide which children's views will be given due weight, so we can ignore the rest; but to adapt our ways of communicating—in particular, listening—so we can understand all children's views, however they may be expressed, and thus give due weight to all of them (and "giving due weight" emphatically does *not* mean giving children whatever they ask for; it means giving appropriate weight to their views as part of the bigger picture). Only when we learn to work in this way are we ready to face the next transformation, which comes when we are able to incorporate all children's views appropriately in decision-making.

The final complexity I want to mention is the relationship between children's participation as service users and their participation as activists and human rights defenders. I first wrote about this in 2010 when I did a piece of research comparing approaches to child participation in Nicaragua and the United Kingdom (Shier, 2010b). While I found many similarities and parallels between the two countries, there were also some interesting differences. One of these was a stronger emphasis on the child as service-user in the UK, with participation used to gather children's opinions with a view to providing more and better public services. Such an approach would have meant little in Nicaragua, where services for children are sparse and have to be fought for, rather than simply consumed.

As I pointed out above, the Nordic countries of Europe are internationally recognised for the range and quality of their social and public services, not to mention the supportive policy frameworks and rights-based perspectives that underpin these. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in this context child participation practice often involves getting children to provide their feedback, opinions, and ideas about these services and policies. In many chapters of this collection we can see how, as in the UK, participation often has this children's services focus, with an emphasis on the child as a service user.

In much of the world, however, like the example of Nicaragua mentioned above, such comprehensive, accessible public services do not exist, so a different approach to participation is needed. Child participation in this context is more likely to consist of children organising and advocating to demand and defend their rights (Shier 2023).

In the introduction to this collection, the editors discuss Lansdown's three-way typology of participation: consultation, collaboration, and child-led initiatives (Lansdown, 2011), and this is a useful model to help us explore this distinction. Where public services are plentiful and accessible, we are more likely to see children being consulted about the services they use—or would like to use. On the other hand, where services are scarce and rights have to be defended, there is little purpose in consultation, and more scope for collaboration and child-led initiatives. In Latin America, this child-led approach is known as *protagonismo infantil*, and while this can be translated as "child protagonism" or "proactive participation," I prefer to

use the Latin-American concept with its origins in the historical struggles of working children to defend their rights and pursue their collective interests (Taft, 2019; Shier, 2019).

As with the other complexities I have mentioned above, this should not be seen as a simple either/or distinction, and I would never urge anyone to choose one approach over the other. Consulting children will always have its place. And there are certainly compelling instances of *protagonismo infantil* in the Nordic countries, some of which can be found in this collection. We also see increasing efforts to move beyond consultation towards genuinely collaborative approaches, with shared power and decision-making. As you read this collection, I urge you to look out for these, and remember, while there is nothing wrong with consulting children, it is only one option. Both genuine collaboration with children and supporting child-led initiatives are alternative approaches worth considering (and maybe the subject of another book?).

And that's all from me. Now it's time for you to delve into the rest of the book. But, as you read, do remember what I said at the start. We have made huge progress over the past thirty years in understanding both the theory and practice of child participation. We have also made progress in recognising the gaps and barriers and finding new ways to address the many challenges remaining. By helping us look back and move forward at the same time, this book is an important part of that process.

Newbridge, County Kildare, Ireland Harry Shier
May 2025

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