

# Children as Citizens: Taking part in decisions and actions

SOUTH AFRICAN **Child Gauge** 2010/2011

Summary written by André Viviers (UNICEF South Africa), Lori Lake & Lucy Jamieson (Children's Institute, University of Cape Town)

The *South African Child Gauge* is a special book about children in South Africa. It is put together every year by the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town, and helps people understand what needs to be done to improve the lives of all children in South Africa.

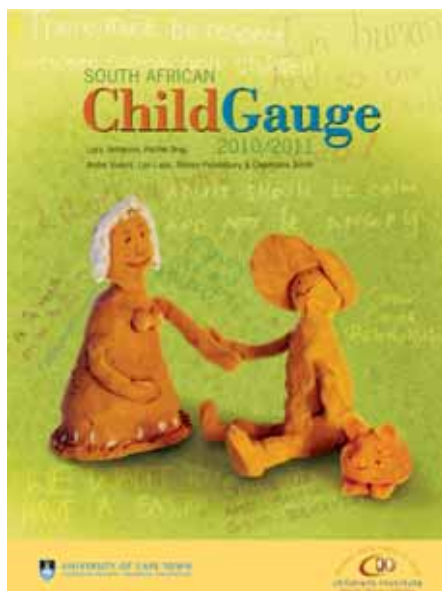
The book is divided into three parts:

**Part 1** looks at laws and policies that affect children.

**Part 2** takes a closer look at a particular topic, such as health or education.

**Part 3** looks at numbers on children's access to schools, clinics, social grants and other services.

The sixth issue of *South African Child Gauge* looks at children's right to participate and to have a say in decisions that affect them.

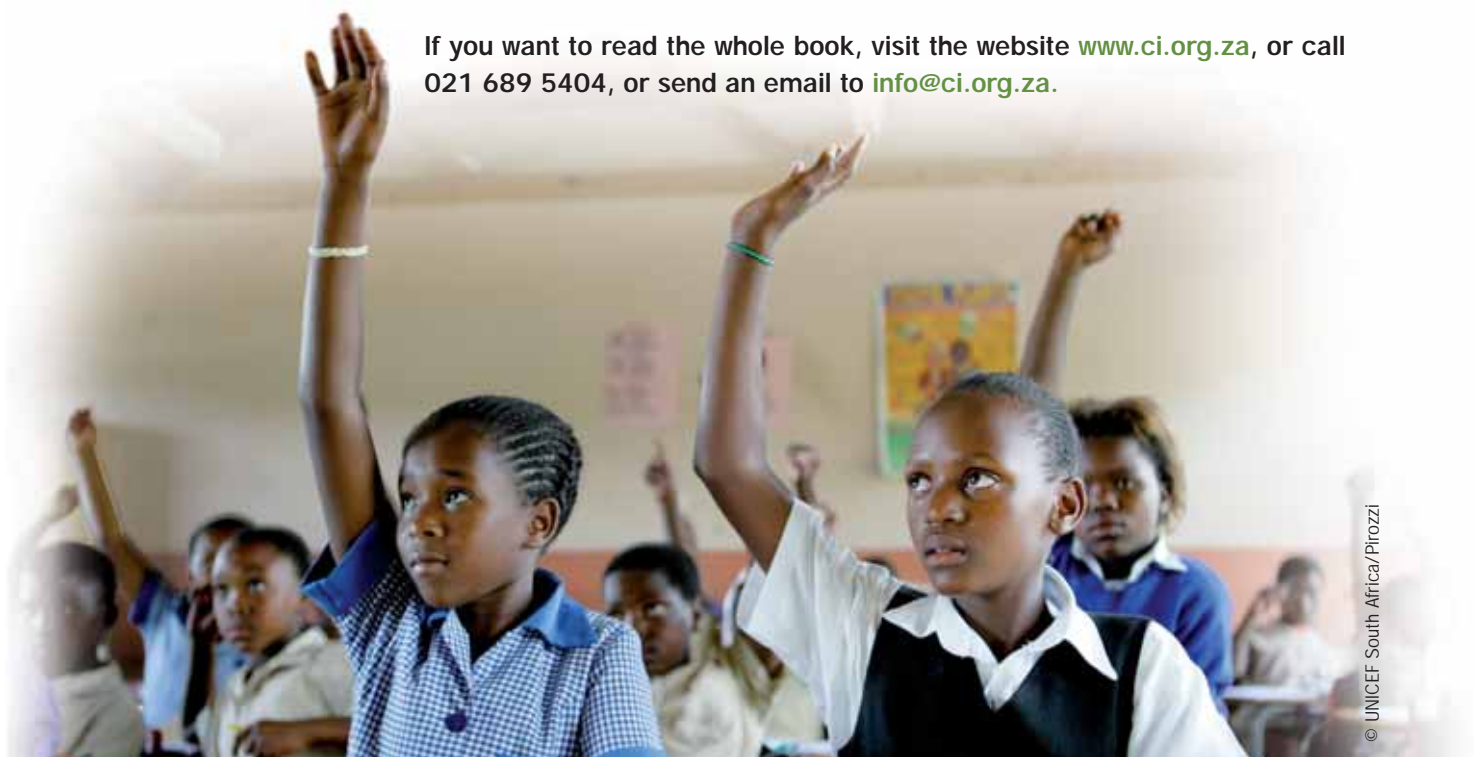


## Introduction

In the *South African Child Gauge 2010/2011*, adults share their experiences of working with children and listening to what children have to say. They look at children's right to participate in decision-making outside the family, and show how working with children is good for both children and adults, and is also good for society.

We have written this summary to help you understand some of the key ideas in the book. This includes: how children can participate in their own health care, in schools, government, and the media (radio, television, newspapers). The book also looks at children's experiences of participation, and how this can change the way that adults connect with children.

If you want to read the whole book, visit the website [www.ci.org.za](http://www.ci.org.za), or call 021 689 5404, or send an email to [info@ci.org.za](mailto:info@ci.org.za).



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### Essay 1: Children have the right to participate

by Lucy Jamieson

Children's right to participate is protected by law, and adults have a responsibility to include children in decisions that affect them. The Constitution says that adults have to put children's best interest first when they make decisions or do things that affect children. This means they have to think about and do what is best for the child. Understanding children's experiences, wishes and opinions allows adults to make the right choices, knowing what the impact of their decisions will be on children. Adults also have to tell children what they have decided, and why.

Children's right to participate is made up of many different rights. These rights are shared by all children everywhere. Children have the right to be treated equally (the same as others) and not to be discriminated against. Children have the right to information that they can understand. Children have the freedom to think their own thoughts, and the right to express themselves freely, but they also have the right to privacy and don't have to share personal thoughts or feelings.

Children have the right to take part in important things that happen in their community, the country and the world.

### Essay 2: Making sure that children's voices are heard

by Rachel Bray

All children – even very young children – are able to express their views and share opinions and ideas. And the best way to find out what is best for children is to listen to them and learn about their lives.

Children need to be actively involved in decisions that affect their lives and the community where they live, so that adults and children can work together to make sure the right decisions are taken. Talking to children also helps governments provide services that truly meet children's needs.

Participation helps children develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to take action and solve problems in their homes and their communities. By working together, adults and children can help build a just and democratic society where everybody is treated equally (the same). This is why it is important that the

voices of all children should be heard: small children and older children; poor children and rich children; children in situations that are difficult or hard; and children from all cultures.

### Essay 3: Children and their relationships with professionals

by Jill Kruger and Minette Coetzee

The law says that professionals (like nurses, doctors, social workers and teachers) must include children in decisions about their lives.

For example the Children's Act (a special law for the protection of children) allows children of 12 years and older to agree to their own medical treatment – as long as the doctor is satisfied that the child is able to understand the decision that he or she is taking.

Doctors and nurses must explain things in a way that even very young children can understand. They must encourage children to ask questions, listen to what children have to say, and take children's views seriously before making decisions. This helps children feel more in control of their lives, and cope better with pain and illness.



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### Essay 4: Children's participation in the running of schools

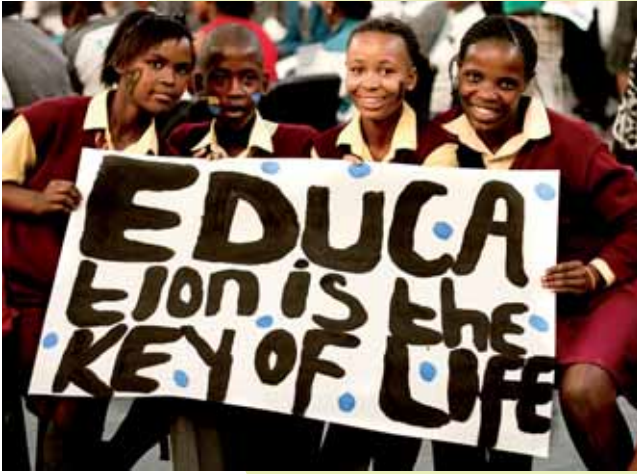
by Shirley Pendlebury

In South Africa children have the right to participate in the running of institutions like schools and child and youth care centres.

Children can be involved in the running of schools in many ways. The first way is through the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) that has representatives from grades 8 to 12. Children who are on the RCL have important responsibilities. They must represent all the learners in the class, and not just speak for themselves. They can also help build good relationships between learners and teachers.

Children are also part of the School Governing Body (SGB), which is made up of parents, two teachers and two learners. Learner representatives have voting rights, which means they have a say in the decisions about how the school is governed. But sometimes it is difficult for learners to participate in the SGB because most of the members are adults. This can be overcome if adults have the right attitude and are willing to listen to children and take their views seriously.





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### Essay 5: Childrens involvement in government

by Christina Nomdo and Hazel Roberts

Children do not have the right to vote, but they do have the right to participate in the way that the country is governed. Government needs to ask children's views about laws, policies and budgets, so they can provide better services to children.

Some people think that policies and budgets are too difficult for children to understand, but adults can help children understand how these difficult words link to their everyday lives so that children are able to share their views.

Members of Parliament and government officials need to recognise the value of working with children. They also have a responsibility to provide the time and resources to support children's participation and take children's views seriously. By participating in local and national government, children learn how to become active citizens and to be part of a democracy.

### Essay 6: Children and the media

by William Bird and Mike Rahfaldt

We hear little about children on the radio or in the newspapers. Journalists should recognise that children have important things to say, and give children the chance to speak for themselves. Journalists need to work in a way that respects children's rights. For example, if a child speaks out about abuse or violence in their school, the journalist should protect the child's identity (and not print their name in the newspaper, or show their face on TV).

The media are an important tool to use, no matter how old you are. The media can provide you with information; and allow you to share your views and ideas. Children learn how to produce their own radio programmes (like the *Radio Workshop* on SAfm). This is a good way to get a lot of people to listen to children.

Children and adults should work together to make sure that children's views are heard and respected in the media. Speak to your local radio station or share your views in the school newspaper. Read the newspapers and listen to the radio and ask yourself: are there stories about all sorts of children (both boys and girls); do the stories give children the chance to speak for themselves; do the stories deal with issues that are important to children; do the stories respect children's rights?

### Essay 7: Childrens experiences of participation

by André Viviers, Glynis Clacherty and Aadielah Maker

Children know that they have something important to offer. They say participation is important to them, because it helps them feel part of the community and country. They want adults to treat them with respect.

Children want their ideas to make a real difference, so they feel unsatisfied and upset when their views are ignored or not used at all. Children also want to feel safe, and they want their privacy to be protected when they share personal or sensitive information.

Participation helps children develop new skills and teaches them how to solve problems, how to stand up for themselves, how to work together, how to communicate with other people, and how to avoid negative influences such as drugs and crime.

Adults who work with children need to stop and ask children how they feel about children's participation. This will help adults to think more carefully about how they can do participation so that it benefits children and the community.

### Essay 8:

#### Changing the way adults and children communicate

by Helen Meintjes

Many adults say that "children should be seen and not heard" and they don't talk to children about important things in the family and community. But, a children's radio project is helping change the way that adults and children talk to one another in a small village in KwaZulu-Natal.

The children's radio project teaches children how to make their own radio programmes. The children decide what topics they want to cover and who they want to interview. As reporters, the children are able to ask adults questions that they would like answered, and get the answers they need. The children's programmes are broadcast on their local radio station which means they get to share their ideas with other children and adults in the community.

Adults are surprised at how much children understand, and are starting to open up and talk about things that are important to children.



© Abaqophi BakwaZisize Abakhangayo Children's Radio Project. Photo: Helen Meintjes



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## Conclusion

by Lucy Jamieson, Shirley Pendlebury and Rachel Bray

Children have a lot to offer to society and this is why it is important that their voices should be heard. Children are citizens. Therefore their views should be respected and their opinions should be considered when decisions are made about them and about the bigger society they live in. This includes their participation as citizens in the making of laws and policies and development plans for local communities.

Children (especially young children) are often not given opportunities to participate in matters that are important to them. Often the reasons for this are that adults think they know better than children or don't have the time to involve children. Children's interests may also clash with adults', so adults may feel threatened and leave children out. It is important to create a culture of respect, so that children and adults can speak and work together.

Children's participation in society works for everyone. It needs to be done with respect for the equal dignity of all who are involved. It is children's right as citizens and will help to build the just and democratic society described in the South African Constitution.

Contributors to this issue of the South African Child Gauge come from a range of organisations including the Children's Institute, Children's Radio Foundation, Media Monitoring Africa, Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (RAPCAN), UNICEF, University of Cape Town and University of Johannesburg.

## External review:

This summary of the South African Child Gauge 2010/2011 was reviewed by: Phathiswa Shushwana (17 years) and Nontsikelelo Dlulani (16 years) from Equal Education; Someleze Yayase (13 years) from Soul Buddyz; Daniel Stemmet (13 years) from RAPCAN; and Martinique Carelse (16 years) from Disabled Children's Action Group.

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## Some useful words to remember:

**Budget:** a plan that tells you how much money will be spent on different things.

**Child:** anyone younger than 18 years.

**Discrimination:** treating people unfairly because of their race, religion, age, gender, disability or any other reason.

**Experience:** the knowledge and skills that a person gains over time (from birth) or through involvement in activities.

**Gauge:** to measure or weigh. The *South African Child Gauge* measures how well the country is doing in meeting children's rights.

**Government:** a group of people with the power to make laws and the responsibility to put the laws into action and deliver services to the people in the country.

**Law:** rules made by government that everybody should follow.

**Participate:** to take part and to be involved in matters that are important to you and members of your community.

**Policy:** a written document that describes how things need to be done. A policy can be written by an organisation, a group, or the government.