



**MANAGING EXITS**  
FROM ARMED CONFLICT



MEAC RESEARCH INTO ACTION

# Reframing Child Participation in Today's Conflict-Affected Contexts

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March 2026

# Background

## About MEAC

UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) is a multi-year collaboration that examines why and how individuals exit armed groups and sustainably reintegrate into civilian life. Employing multi-method longitudinal studies that follow the trajectories of former armed group affiliates and their non-associate peers across six countries, MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based prevention and reintegration programming. The MEAC project benefits from generous support by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); Global Affairs Canada (GAC); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM); UNICEF; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience in the Lake Chad Basin; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

## About this Series

MEAC produces a series of short publications aimed at policymakers and practitioners to highlight key findings but recognizes that there is relevant research on the subject that may remain inaccessible to them. In an effort to make these studies, which are often highly technical and/or sit behind academic journal paywalls, accessible to decision-makers and to connect them to the evidence base MEAC is creating, UNIDIR has introduced this interview series. In this series, MEAC takes the role of an interlocutor, bridging the gap between academic research and practical application by presenting brief interviews with scholars on pertinent topics. What follows is a short, digestible dialogue around the main findings of a recent study and their policy and practical implications for those working to prevent and respond to political violence and armed conflict.

**Citation:** Sean Molloy<sup>1</sup>, "Reframing Child Participation in Today's Conflict-Affected Contexts", *MEAC Research into Action*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/26/02>.

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<sup>1</sup> **Dr. Sean Molloy** is a Newcastle University Academic Track Fellow at Newcastle Law School, Newcastle University. His research focuses on children's rights, peace processes, and transitional justice, and he has advised governments, international organisations, and UN mandates on inclusion, accountability, and governance in conflict-affected settings.

# Overview

This piece introduces a model to explain why children’s participation in peacebuilding and transitional contexts so often fails to translate from rights commitments into meaningful political influence. Drawing on 26 semi-structured interviews with practitioners working across peacebuilding, child rights, and transitional justice, the research approaches participation not as a discrete event, but as a fragile, relational process that must be actively assembled, mediated, and sustained over time. The article builds on my earlier work examining the legal and normative foundations for children’s participation in peace processes.

The article’s central finding is that children’s participation is constrained less by children’s capacity or willingness to engage, and more by adult gatekeeping, safeguarding regimes, institutional fragility, and political volatility. These dynamics echo patterns identified in my previous research on child participation in peace negotiations and peace agreement implementation, where inclusion is often formally endorsed but operationally diluted.<sup>2</sup> The model reframes participation as an interdependent system of labour, ethics, and translation, showing how intermediary organisations, safeguarding practices, and shifting political opportunity structures shape whether children’s perspectives are heard, taken seriously, and acted upon. In doing so, the model complements existing participation frameworks, such as rights-based and process-oriented models, by foregrounding the organisational and political work required to sustain children’s influence in conflict-affected contexts.

## Interview

***1. Dr. Molloy, in addition to your legal research, you’ve advised governments, NGOs, and international organizations (IOs) on the protection of rights, accountability, and governance issues. What about those experiences inspired this study on how to advance child participation in peacebuilding??***

My interest in child participation in peacebuilding grew directly out of my advisory and research work. Across roles with organisations such as International IDEA, Conciliation Resources, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights, I repeatedly encountered a tension between the widespread recognition of children as rights-holders and much more ambivalent attitudes towards their participation in peacebuilding and political processes. While

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sean Molloy, “[Living Apart Together: Child Participation in the Context of Peace Process Theory and Practice](#),” *Peacebuilding*, May (2025): 1–18; Sean Molloy, “[Child Soldiers and Peace Agreements](#),” *PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform*, University of Edinburgh (2023); Sean Molloy, “[Child Protection Provisions and Peace Agreements](#),” *PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform*, University of Edinburgh (2022).

children's rights were often affirmed in principle, participation, particularly in peace and security contexts, remained contested, conditional, or even actively resisted.

In policy and programme settings, children were frequently acknowledged rhetorically as important stakeholders, yet meaningful engagement was often curtailed by risk aversion, short funding cycles, institutional silos, and uncertainty about how or whether it was appropriate to involve children in political decision-making at all. These challenges were often intensified by the dominance of international actors in the design and delivery of peacebuilding interventions. International organisations can bring resources, legitimacy, and normative leverage, but they also frequently operate at a distance from the conflict, its social underpinnings, and the everyday realities of children's lives. As a result, participation initiatives were often designed as short-term or one-off exercises, bypassing local organisations and community-based actors who had already invested in trust-building and sustained engagement with children. This was not simply a question of geographic or cultural distance, but also reflected the institutional roles and operating models of many international actors. Participation was frequently approached as a technical or procedural requirement—something to be delivered within defined project timelines, reporting cycles, and diplomatic processes—rather than as a relational process that depends on continuity, trust, and responsiveness over time. Operating primarily at national or international levels, international organisations were often less well positioned to sustain the long-term engagement needed to support children's participation in meaningful ways, particularly when compared to local actors whose work was embedded in communities and shaped by ongoing relationships.

These experiences raised a recurring question: if children's status as rights-holders is broadly recognised, why does participation remain so fragile, contested, and uneven in practice particularly in peace processes? This study emerged as an attempt to answer that question empirically, by foregrounding practitioner experience and examining the often-invisible labour required to sustain children's participation in volatile political environments.

## ***2. What are the legal obligations for including children in peacebuilding and who do they apply to?***

At the international level, the legal foundation for child participation is anchored most clearly in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which establishes children's right to express their views in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight.<sup>3</sup> The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has interpreted this obligation as a general principle of the Convention, applicable at all times, including during armed conflict and in post-conflict transitions.<sup>4</sup> This places participation obligations not only on States Parties, but also on

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<sup>3</sup> [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), 1989.

<sup>4</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), [General comment No. 12 \(2009\): The right of the child to be heard](#), CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009.

international organisations and peace process actors operating under state authority or mandate.

Domestic legal frameworks, however, vary considerably among States that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While ratification creates binding international legal obligations, the extent to which these obligations are incorporated into domestic law, and how they are operationalised in practice, differs significantly across jurisdictions. Some post-conflict constitutions, child rights statutes, or peace-related legislation explicitly recognise children as rights-holders and provide avenues for participation, while others remain silent or implicitly restrictive, confining children’s involvement to protection or welfare domains.

At the same time, near-universal ratification of the Convention has helped establish children’s participation as a global normative expectation, even where domestic legal frameworks remain uneven or incomplete. In many contexts, participation rights are mediated through a patchwork of constitutional provisions, child protection laws, and administrative practices, rather than clearly embedded within peace process design or governance structures. As a result, while international law provides an important normative and legal foundation, domestic legal frameworks play a critical role in determining whether and how children’s participation can be realised in practice. Legal recognition alone, however, rarely guarantees meaningful participation. Instead, legal norms operate as enabling or constraining conditions within a wider ecosystem shaped by political will, institutional design, safeguarding practices, and the role of intermediary organisations.

### ***3. Beyond international law, what other agreements, political commitments, and norms call for children to be included in collective efforts to transition from conflict to peace?***

There are various political commitments, policy frameworks, and normative agendas, which call for children’s inclusion in peacebuilding. These include UN Security Council resolutions on Children and Armed Conflict;<sup>5</sup> guidance for mediators on inclusive peace processes;<sup>6</sup> and commitments embedded in transitional justice practice, such as child-sensitive truth commissions.<sup>7</sup> Norms emerging from peacebuilding scholarship and practice are also important. In particular, a growing sense of dissatisfaction with top-down, internationally driven peace processes—especially following mixed or fragile outcomes in contexts such as Bosnia, Afghanistan, and South Sudan—prompted greater attention to how peace is experienced and sustained at local levels. This shift has encouraged more relational and everyday understandings of peacebuilding, emphasising inclusion, legitimacy, and the perspectives of

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<sup>5</sup> See Security Council, [S/RES/2427](#), 2018, paras. 22 and 23.

<sup>6</sup> See Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC), “[Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict](#),” 2020; Watchlist, [Checklist for drafting children and armed conflict provisions in ceasefire and peace agreements](#), 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Sean Molloy, “[Empowering the Future: Enhancing Child Participation in Transitional Justice](#),” *PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform*, University of Edinburgh (2025).

those most affected by conflict. As a result, arguments for including groups traditionally excluded from formal negotiations, including children, have gained greater traction in both policy and practice.

***4. You've examined State and IO responses to these legal, normative, and political foundations for child participation in peacebuilding over time. With all the dramatic shifts afoot in the multilateral system today, how have things changed of late and what does that mean for the prospects for young people to be involved in building peace?***

Over the past decade, the multilateral environment that once sustained many arguments for inclusive peacebuilding has changed quite dramatically. Earlier approaches to peace processes, closely associated with liberal peacebuilding, treated peace agreements as potentially transformative moments.<sup>8</sup> This created space, at least in principle, for inclusionary agendas grounded in international law, human rights norms, and participation. Children's participation was often justified within this framework, whether through Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN policy agendas, or broader claims about legitimacy and sustainability. What my recent work highlights is that many contemporary peace processes no longer operate within these assumptions. Peace-making has become more fragmented, more transactional, and increasingly driven by elite bargains aimed at containing violence rather than transforming societies. Multilateral actors such as the UN often play a more limited or contested role, while regional powers and ad hoc coalitions, sometimes operating outside human rights frameworks altogether, have become more prominent. In these settings, inclusion is not a priority; rather stability, control, and short-term deal-making tend to take precedence.

For children, this shift has real consequences. Strategies that relied on multilateral leverage, rights-based advocacy, or the assumed openness of peace negotiations are now far less reliable. At the same time, there are also signs that this changing landscape is forcing a rethink. Rather than focusing exclusively on formal negotiations, practitioners are exploring alternative routes: local-level peace processes, civil society networks, and digitally mediated forms of engagement that allow children's perspectives to circulate even when elite spaces are closed. These efforts can help ensure that children's experiences and priorities continue to inform peace processes, even when participation does not occur directly at the negotiating table. Increasingly, the challenge is not only how to secure children's physical presence within formal negotiations, but how to strengthen the connections between these different participation

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<sup>8</sup> Liberal peacebuilding refers to internationally supported efforts to end conflict and build peace through the promotion of democratic governance, rule of law, human rights, and market-oriented economic reforms, often led by external actors and focused on institutional design at the national level. Critics have argued that such approaches can marginalise local actors and overlook the social and relational dimensions of peace.

spaces so that children's perspectives can travel, gain traction, and shape outcomes across the wider peace process.

The prospects for children's participation today are therefore more constrained but also more plural. The task is no longer simply to include children in peace talks, but to sustain their political voice across a fragmented and increasingly complex peace architecture, ensuring that participation outside formal negotiations can still influence decisions within them.

***5. Beyond the current geopolitical environment, what are the biggest challenges to ensuring young people have a voice in how we address conflicts and build peaceful societies?***

A central insight of my model is that the main obstacles to children's participation are not located with children themselves, but within the systems that are meant to enable their engagement. One of the most significant challenges to meaningful child participation is the persistent tension between protection and participation. Safeguarding frameworks are essential in conflict-affected contexts, yet the research shows that they are often operationalised in ways that treat children's political engagement as inherently risky. This risk logic travels through funders, institutions, and intermediary organisations, narrowing the space for participation and placing a premium on reputational risk management over relational engagement with children.

Crucially, this does not reflect an absence of agency on the part of children. Research across conflict and post-conflict settings consistently demonstrates that children exercise agency in tactical, creative, and contextually bounded ways, often within highly constrained environments. However, childhood studies scholarship highlights that agency is relational: it depends on how children's actions and expressions are received, mediated, and acted upon by adults and institutions. When participation environments are shaped by risk aversion and gatekeeping, the issue is not that children lack agency, but that existing forms of agency struggle to gain traction or translate into influence. It is this disconnect between children's everyday agency and the structures that determine whether it is recognised that my model seeks to explain.

In response, many organisations work across multiple levels of the ecosystem of child participation simultaneously. They support children directly through creative and participatory practices, promote child-led initiatives, and develop safe spaces where children can articulate their experiences and priorities. At the same time, they engage in less visible but equally important work aimed at shifting adult attitudes and community norms—challenging assumptions about children's capacity, influencing how adults respond to children's views, and creating conditions in which children are more likely to be listened to by those with authority. This dual focus reflects an understanding that participation depends not only on children's expression, but also on adult receptiveness and institutional willingness to hear and act.

A second challenge is structural. The model highlights how participation relies on sustained, often under-recognised labour: trust-building, ethical mediation, translation of children's perspectives into policy-relevant forms, and feedback loops that demonstrate impact. Declining funding for child-focused programming, short project cycles, and weakened multilateral institutions make it difficult to sustain this work over time. As a result, even well-designed participation initiatives risk becoming episodic or symbolic, rather than contributing to durable shifts in how children's voices shape peacebuilding and conflict-response processes.

**6. Despite these challenges, your work makes it clear that there are advantages to child participation in peace processes. What is the compelling case for the inclusion of young people?**

Research on child soldiers offers a useful illustration of why children's participation matters. A substantial body of scholarship and practice has demonstrated that children join armed forces for a wide range of reasons, spanning coercion, survival, social pressure, protection, and, in some cases, perceived opportunity. Contemporary approaches increasingly conceptualise recruitment along a "continuum of coercion", rather than as a binary distinction between victim and perpetrator, reflecting the complex and often constrained choices children make in conflict-affected environments.<sup>9</sup> This shift has gained significant traction within child protection and reintegration practice, precisely because it foregrounds children's lived experiences and disrupts overly simplistic legal and moral categories. This insight has had practical consequences; if children's pathways into armed groups are varied and context-dependent, then effective reintegration strategies cannot be designed without listening to children themselves.

A similar logic has informed transitional justice practice in post-conflict settings such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Colombia, where mechanisms including truth commissions and victim participation processes have shown that children experience conflict differently from adults.<sup>10</sup> Children's testimonies have helped illuminate not only the specific harms they suffer, but also the everyday social, educational, and relational dimensions of violence, as well as ideas for repair, reconciliation, and societal transformation that are often overlooked in adult-centric accounts.

The same reasoning thus applies to peace processes and peace agreements. If children's experiences of conflict are distinct, and if their insights are already recognised as essential to reintegration and transitional justice, it follows that excluding them from peace-making processes creates a critical blind spot. Understanding how to build sustainable peace, particularly in societies emerging from conflict, requires attention to how children understand

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, eds., [Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict](#) (UN University, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Sean Molloy, "[Empowering the Future: Enhancing Child Participation in Transitional Justice](#)," *PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform*, University of Edinburgh (2025).

insecurity, justice, belonging, and the future. Participation is therefore not simply a rights-based add-on, but a necessary condition for designing peace processes and agreements that respond to the realities of those most affected by conflict and most likely to live with its consequences.

***7. What practical steps would you advise Member States, IOs, and even armed groups (or those who engage with them) to accept, require, and promote the inclusion of child participation in peace processes?***

### **Member States**

A primary concern for Member States should be recognising that meaningful child participation does not start from scratch at the moment a peace process begins. In many conflict-affected contexts, local and international organisations are already doing sustained, relational work with children—supporting participation through creative practices, child-led initiatives, and long-term engagement with families and communities. The problem, as the model shows, is that peace processes often attempt to design participation as a one-off event or consultative exercise, which risks being extractive rather than transformative.

States should therefore move beyond symbolic commitments by embedding child participation into peace process design, implementation, and monitoring in ways **that build on existing ecosystems**. This includes resourcing intermediary organisations that have already established trust with children, creating child-friendly consultative mechanisms that operate over time rather than at single moments, and ensuring clear feedback loops so children can see how their input is used. Participation should be understood as a process that depends on continuity, trust, and responsiveness—not simply as an obligation to be discharged at the negotiation stage.

### **International Organisations**

International Organisations have a critical role to play in aligning peace processes with participatory realities on the ground. This requires investing in organisational readiness for participation, including staff training, ethical guidance, and institutional incentives that value children's perspectives across the life cycle of a peace process. IOs should also resist pressures to treat participation as a procedural checkbox and instead work with existing child-focused organisations to support sustained engagement before, during, and after formal negotiations. Participation should be treated as a core governance function, grounded in long-term relationships, rather than as an optional or time-limited add-on.

## **Armed Groups (and those organizations that engage with them)**

Where direct engagement with children associated with armed groups—whether because they are still within armed group ranks or living in areas under their control—is unsafe, inappropriate, or not possible, efforts need to be made to ensure that conflict-affected children’s experiences nevertheless inform dialogue through indirect means. This typically involves working through intermediary actors, such as child protection organisations, community-based groups, and monitoring bodies, that have established relationships with conflict-affected children and understand their priorities and concerns.

These insights can then be integrated into engagement with armed groups through monitoring and reporting mechanisms, humanitarian dialogue, advocacy, and compliance processes, particularly in relation to protection, release and reintegration, and guarantees of non-recurrence. The goal is not to facilitate direct consultation between armed groups and children, but to ensure that engagement with armed actors is informed by credible, ethically gathered knowledge about children’s experiences. This approach helps ensure that efforts to influence armed group behaviour are grounded in the realities of children’s lives, while maintaining appropriate safeguards and avoiding exposing children to further risk.

## **Cross-cutting**

Across all actors, participation must be understood as ecosystemic. This means recognising that children’s influence depends on intermediary labour, safeguarding work, trust-building, adult responsiveness, and political negotiation over time. The central challenge is not a lack of participation initiatives, but the tendency of peace processes to overlook, bypass, or instrumentalise the infrastructures that already sustain children’s voices. Strengthening participation therefore requires resourcing and protecting these ecosystems, rather than repeatedly reinventing participation as a short-term intervention.

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