



Commissioner for Children

25 May 2023

Submission from the Child Government Monitors in the office of the Commissioner for Children on the concept of the Child Rights Ambassador concept from the South African Human Rights Commission

Introduction

The Western Cape Commissioner for Children (WCCC) agreed to facilitate children's feedback on the Child Rights Ambassadors concept note of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC).

Child participation in the WCCC

The WCCC is committed to build models of substantive child participation in governance decision making. Thus far, the Commissioner for Children has developed four child participation models including developing a Child Government Monitors forum, conducting Community Child Rights Workshops, engaging children in Topical Consultations, and involving children in Government Budget Monitoring.

Child Government Monitors: WCCC works in partnership with a group of children called Child Government Monitors (CGM or monitors). The Child Government Monitors Forum is an engagement platform initiated by the Commissioner, which operates mainly on WhatsApp. Children, especially those in far-flung communities, report to the Commissioner on their lived realities and bring child rights violations to her attention. This meeting is scheduled every Wednesday afternoon for (2) two hours from 5-7 pm. In these sessions, CGM are educated about human rights, governance, self-care, as well as opportunities to be involved in operational matters (such as staff interviews) and the formulation of submissions for law reform. The CGMs come together in a quarterly in-person workshop. The Child Advisory Council (referred to as advisors) comprises of the (12) twelve most committed CGMs, and they provide advice on strategic decisions and operational matters when the Commissioner requires it. The advisors meet with the Commissioner on WhatsApp every Monday from 5-6 pm, as the need arises. These advisors are also the key ambassadors for the office in meetings, conferences and when



Commissioner for Children

travel opportunities arise. They lead discussions on submissions into law, policy, and practice reform. The advisory council gathers in-person when requested.

Community Child Rights Workshops: Community child rights workshops enables the WCCC to have a sound understanding of the realities in which children live. It allows the office to obtain a first-hand experience of the conditions in which children live. The Commissioner visits different municipalities to understand the context in which children live and to monitor the services provided by Western Cape Departments of Cultural Affairs and Sport (DCAS), Education (WCED), Health and Wellness (DOHW) and Social Development (DSD) from the perspectives of service beneficiaries (children and parents) and stakeholders. Children share their community safety maps, their dreams and worries, as well as their recommendations for the four government departments in the social sector in the ambit of the Commissioner for Children's mandate.

Consultations with Children: Consultations with children are focused on topical issues. The Commissioner has conducted several consultations with children across the province. These consultations usually occur at schools. The first consultation completed focused on "Learning in COVID times" and the current consultation focuses on "Do RCLs voices really count?".

Government Budget Monitoring: The WCCC is monitoring government budgets in partnership with Child Government Monitors. The aim of budget monitoring is to determine whether child rights are being prioritised by the government. So far, we have built children's capacity to understand national and provincial budget. In July 2023, we build local government budget advocacy strategies with Child Government Monitors as well as the Junior City of Council in Cape Town and the Junior Town Council of the Bitou Municipality.

Children are thus an integral part of this office. Once a quarter the CGMs come together for a training camp.



Commissioner for Children

Method of engagement

On the 17 May 2023, the Child Rights Ambassadors (CRA) concept note was shared with the CGM. 20 CGMs participated in the session and shared their views on the concept. The concept note contained background information, the CRA framework, its objective, training that will be provided to the CRA, expectations of the CRA, and the annual CRA conference.

The Commissioner engaged children on this Child Rights Ambassadors concept document on her special WhatsApp forum. The following proposals in the concept note was posted on the WhatsApp group and children were invited to give their input:

- Child ambassadors will be a representative of the country; there will be 3 representatives from each province
- Ages 12 – 17 (younger children will be accommodated later)
- Annual conference on a topical issue
- Child rights ambassadors will be trained on child rights and how to exercise them
- Duties - engage commissioner, teach other children rights, receive complaints about violations, attend training, part of planning annual conference
- First conference topic is online safety

This submission will reflect the views of children. Themes were derived from views of children who consulted with the Commissioner. The recommendations and conclusion will include the Commissioner's opinion.

Analysis

The following themes emanated from the discussion with the Child Government Monitors.

- Support for the Child Rights Ambassadors concept
- Contact time with the ambassadors
- Adult capacity in the SAHRC to continuously support ambassadors
- Recommendations for implementing the concept of CRAs



Commissioner for Children

Support for the Child Rights Ambassadors concept

Since CGM understand the mandate of the WCCC, they know also understand the importance and power of the South African Human Rights Commission as a Chapter 9 institution. The CGMs are supportive of the concept which proposes the creation of Child Rights Ambassadors (referred to as ambassadors) in the office of the South African Human Rights Commission. The understood that these children would also be Child Human Rights Defenders like themselves, they exclaimed:

"We protect the rights of children" – Favour

"We all want a better life for kids" – Liyanda

"We all want the same thing which is a world where children can live freely" – Solakha

"We all have the same goal to protect the rights of children"- Liliitha

"Be the voice for those who can't raise their voices, fight for children's rights" - Cai

The Child Government Monitors support the idea of a geographically, demographically, and socially representative cohort of ambassadors. However, they wondered why only 3 representatives per province would be chosen. They said:

"Why is it (o)nly 3 children from each province? Isn't that limiting children's voices?" – Vimbai

"Crazy" – Tara

"Hectic" – Solakha

"Why did they come up with these numbers, only 27" – John-Lee

"Oh, it won't be a lot" – Liyanda

"Having limited number of reps at a district just limits or make the chances of the next kid that wants to join smaller and letting their voice not be heard and you don't know if that child has great ideas and they also have a vision that they would like to see that might be different than the next child, and only meeting once a year won't be enough" – Liliitha



Commissioner for Children

The above views may be due to the CGMs' own experience as they were able to join the CGM forum at different points in the year. Currently the CGM group consists of 75 children in one province. The only criteria thus far are that they are children (under 18) living in the province, with an interest in being a child rights defender. However, the Commissioner is reconsidering these criteria as the cohort of CGMs have become too much to manage to provide proper mentorship to each child and enable substantive participation opportunities.

Child Government Monitors were thrilled that the ambassadors would receive training to enhance their knowledge on child rights. They applauded this saying:

"Yes" – John-Lee

"Lovely" – Lilitha

"This is a great suggestion" – Solakha

"Interesting" – Jenicton

"TOO GOOD" – Tara

"Yes, I like this one more" – Zoey

"Please." – Liyanda

Furthermore, they reacted positively with a thumbs-up emoji to the age cohort for CRAs and having an annual conference and liked the topic of online safety for the first conference.

Building capacity in children who take on the responsibility to be the voice for other children requires children to be educated and informed of child rights and the different lived realities of children in the country. This is achieved by investing time and energy into connecting regularly with children and active mentoring by the Commissioner and Officer charged with the child participation in the Commissioner for Children's Office.



Commissioner for Children

Contact time with ambassadors

Drawing from their own experience, child government monitors realise the investment meaningful child participation requires from the adults supporting them. They questioned how engagements with the child rights ambassadors would be conducted. They also wanted to know the frequency of engagements. They asked:

“Are they also going to open a group chat or not?” – Vimbai

“And how many times will the children meet in a year and how will they communicate?” – Vimbai

“Will all the meetings be online to accommodate everyone since they all will in different provinces?” – John-Lee

“Like meeting once a year, you wouldn't get to interact with one another or be able to build a connection” - Tara

From the above contributions, the CGM expect more than one meeting for child ambassadors as continued engagements has been beneficial and meaningful for them. The CGMs view their forum not only as a space for dialogue but also as a network for social support and friendships. Children require many engagements and support to be able to participate meaningfully in governance.

Adult capacity in the SAHRC to continuously support ambassadors

The CGMs noted the duties to be fulfilled by the CRAs. While they are excited by the opportunities this affords other children, they raised concerns about children's abilities to cope with the duties assigned to them. These concerns stem from the number of representatives per province and the negative effects such as secondary traumatising of receiving complaints of child rights violations.

“How will 3 reps per province be able to cope with the duties and demands that come with the role? Will there be mentor? Advisors? Etc – Ande

“Will 3 reps be able to cope with all the duties and responsibilities in province?” – John-Lee



Commissioner for Children

"What about the mental health of children who will be receiving the complaints?" – Liyanda

"The 3 reps from the provinces, will they have some kind of assistance to help manage the duties? Cause it's a lot for just 3 people." – Solakha

"Will the child ambassadors have someone to guide them or are they just seriously going to be trained and just put on the frontline?" – Vimbai

The CGMs strongly voiced that CRAs must be adequately capacitated and supported by skilled adults. CGMs are continuously educated about the importance of boundaries and their role in bringing the Commissioner's attention to child rights violations (without getting too involved) or complaints about government services rendered by departments under the WCCC's mandate. CGMs are informed that certain issues must be managed by adult duty bearers. The following section encompasses recommendations from the CGM.

Naturally, the CGMs' views on the CRAs concept were informed by their own experiences of being a CGM. It is through these lens that we include a few recommendations which emerged during the discussion session with CGMs.

Recommendations for implementing the concept of CRAs

Recruitment strategies to enable meaningful child participation

First, from the CGMs' own experience, they note that the following recruitment strategies, employed by the Commissioner for Children, work well. They shared:

"Go to schools, recruit online, at events, and so much more" – John-Lee

"Going to schools. Workshops" – Lilita

"Looking at the personalities and who stands out in the crowd" – Imivuyo

"Road-trips, school visits, recruits online" – Vimbai

"Eh there uh...You guys found me by bringing my sister...And how my sister always said good things about the CGM" – Vincent



Commissioner for Children

"You had to go around the whole Western Cape and visiting schools and what I love about the office is you guys didn't just rock up there and talked for hours and

Management of a child participation platform

Second, the CGMs drew from their personal experience of the child participation models in the office of the Commissioner for Children. They are acutely aware of the amount of work that goes into meaningful child participation. This is mainly due to the transparent nature in which the office works with the children. They are constantly in the loop of what happens in the office and are included in operational processes. The inputs below describe the CGMs' insights of the managerial aspects of the Child Government Monitors Forum:

"Taking turns doing sessions, pre topic prep, having people like @Masego (an intern) making notes" – John-Lee

"Where does one even start, you guys have meetings in the kitchen, office, everywhere it's a lot of behind-the-scenes work" – Solakha

"Firstly, paperwork, as a whole, is crazy. Having to plan questions before hand, having to take notes down of those sessions, events planning" – Tara

"Making sure everything goes as planned. Thinking and visit schools. Get paperwork ready" – Jenicton

In addition, working with the whole child means caring for their wellbeing. One CGM commented:

"It takes a lot of work, WOW. Quite a lot. Planning prepping and also literally noticing how maybe a monitor is off grid and you contact them just to make sure they ohk" – Vimbai

Some children have been a CGM since the day the Commissioner took office in June 2020. Thus, a few have almost three years of experience on this forum. They appreciate the effort put into managing the group and the way in which their voices are represented in the work of the office and submissions to decision-makers.



Commissioner for Children

Representation of children's authentic voices

Third, the representation of children's authentic voices is vital in the promotion and protection of child rights. The CGMs greatly appreciate that their authentic voice is used in submissions. They value opportunities to represent submissions in person and that they receive feedback on their inputs. They shared:

"Our voices are literally in submissions, and we go to rep it in person" – John-Lee

"We see how you use our authentic voices in submissions. How you let us make our own speeches and represent in places without making us speak what any of you wrote (meaning you or Tessa)" – Vimbai

"During our sessions we always discussing matters and then submit our responses" – Imivuyo

"Our voices count so that we can be heard and to show people we are capable of submitting responses to a matter. - Vincent"

"I saw through the submissions. First the posters now the youth parliament" – Ande

"Submissions... how our words are directly used and not changed" – Lilitha

"We see change, it's like after we raised our concerns about something and made a submission, we'll get feedback. It's not always what we wanted, but it's always something we can work on, so it shows our voices count" – Solakha

Opportunities to voice their opinions on matters that affect them are of utmost importance. This could be done in the form of submissions for law reform and input into policies that affect the rights of children.

Thus, the main recommendations are that there should be sound recruitment strategies to enable meaningful participation, proper management of a child participation platform, as well as representation of children's authentic voice should arise from this child participation platform. The above recommendations emanated from the discussion on the CRA concept note. The CGM have shared how they perceive the CGM forum to be managed and how they know their voices count.



Commissioner for Children

Conclusion

The Child Government Monitors are mostly in favour of the concept of the Child Rights Ambassadors in the office of the South African Human Rights Commission. They provide insights based on their experience of meaningful and substantive child participation in the office of the Western Cape Commissioner for Children. They emphasise that adults implementing child participation strategies must be especially skilled and be prepared to invest significant contact time and mentor children. They recommend that the recruitment strategies enable meaningful child participation, that the child participation forum be expertly managed, and that children appreciate when their authentic voice reaches key decision makers.



Commissioner for Children

Participating Child Government Monitors

Ande, 17, Gugulethu

Andle, 13, Bitterfontein

Ciara, 13, Elsie's River

Favour, 17, Kraaifontein

Imivuyo, 14, Strandfontein

Isabella, 16, Newfields Athlone

Jenicton, 16, Vredendal North

John-Lee, 15, Blackheath

Kristen, 16, Dennewire, Blackheath

Layla, 14, Strandfontein

Lilitha, 14, Eersterivier

Liyanda, 17, Kwanokuthula

Ruan, 15, Rietpoort

Siphahle, 13, Strandfontein

Siseko, 18, Westlake

Solakha, Kwanokuthula

Tara, 14, Wetton

Vimbai, 17, Plumstead

Vincent, 14, Plumstead

Zoey, 12, Riversdale