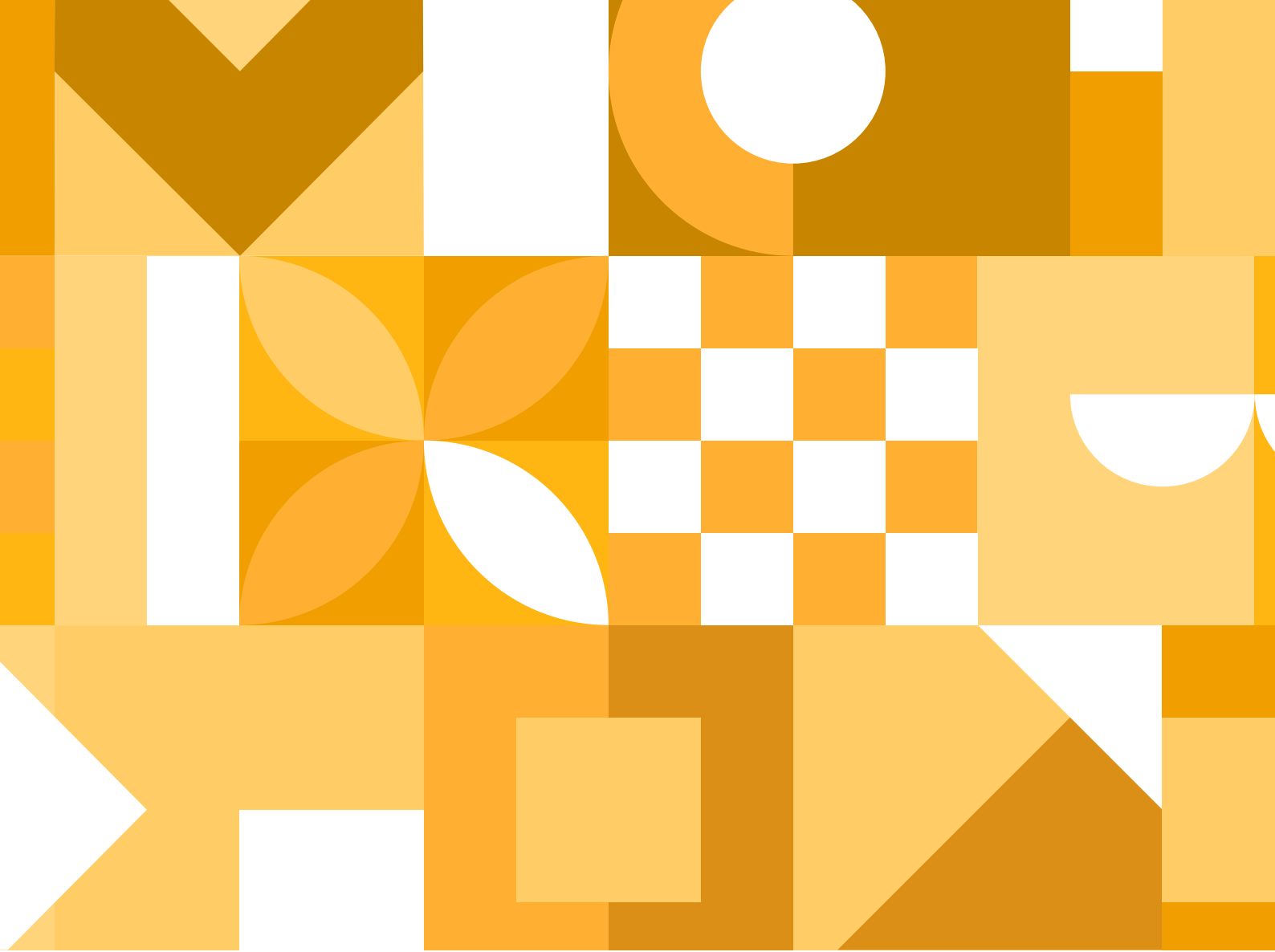




6 AUGUST 2020

# NPC LEARNING BRIEF

REACHING OUT TO SOUTH AFRICAN  
CHILDREN DURING LOCKDOWN



The National Planning Commission wishes to extend our gratitude to UNICEF South Africa for supporting the design of all the Children's NDP reports. They have also enabled the provision of printed versions of the three Children's NDP reports to the NPC Commissioners and the members of the Cabinet of the South African government.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The National Planning Commission would like to thank all the children who participated in the workshops and the research study.

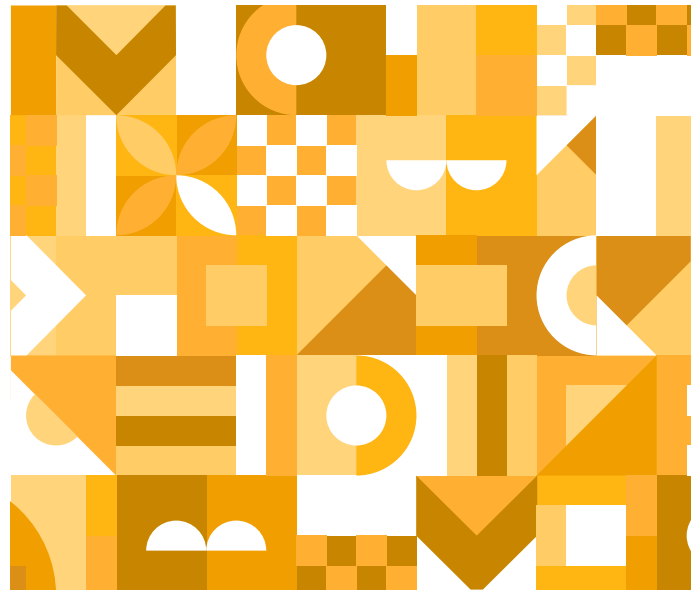
Shaamela Cassiem and Norma Rudolph, veteran child rights actors, are thanked for their support to Commissioner Nomdo in the planning, implementation and write up of this project. Southern Hemisphere is thanked for their role in research design and data analysis. Thanks to Commissioner Dooms for being the caretaker of the Children's NDP initiative.

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This learning brief describes the South African National Planning Commission (NPC) children's participation project Reaching Out to Children During Lockdown. The brief also describes examples of other national and international children's participation projects initiated during lockdown. Descriptions of the child participation projects detail methods and findings.

Findings demonstrate that reaching out to children, even during a national lockdown, is achievable and that children have valuable inputs to share for governance decision-making. These models show that child participation in governance is a realistic goal when the political will exists.

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# HOW DID THE PROJECT REACH CHILDREN DURING LOCKDOWN?

On 3 April 2020, the NPC agreed to extend the Children's National Development Plan (NDP) initiative to include a project to reach out to children during lockdown. The project ran between 15 April 2020 and 20 May 2020 and targeted children (under 18 years) during the lockdown period.

The aim of this project was to reveal and record children's experiences, feelings and activities during the lockdown. The project developed partnerships with organisations with a service footprint in communities that focused on children's rights and child protection: the Early Learning Resource Unit; World Vision SA; Ntataise; and the National Association of Child and Youth Care Workers.

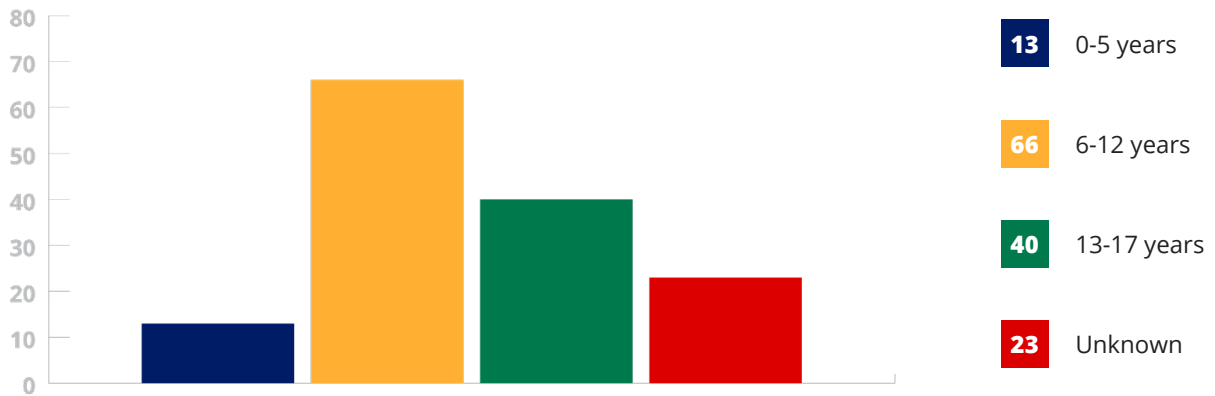
Connections were made with children who were already well-supported by one of these organisations. The

NPC project did not reach children living in precarious situations such as victims of child abuse and those living in very remote rural areas.

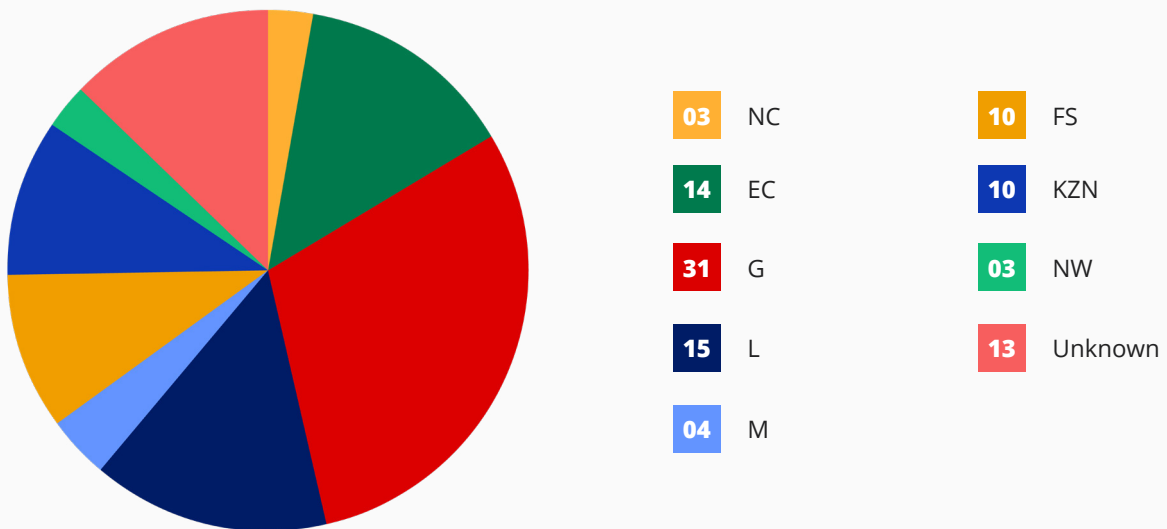
Interviews were mainly conducted by parents and, in some cases, by the childcare worker from the partner organisation. An electronic consent form was sent to parents via Whatsapp and completed before the interviews with their children. The NPC received inputs in Whatsapp voice notes or texts from children across all nine provinces. Children communicated in their home language which was later translated into English during the transcribing of interviews.

***There were 142 respondents.***

## RESPONDENTS



## RESPONDENTS

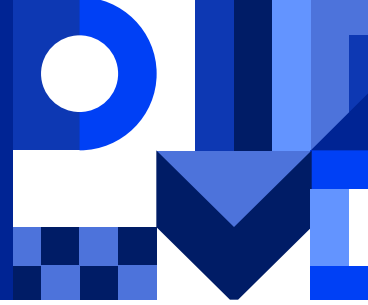


## CHILDREN WERE ASKED FIVE QUESTIONS:

*The answers to these questions were analysed to understand the key themes emerging from the children's responses.*

- 01** What do you know about the coronavirus/COVID-19?
- 02** Who told you about it?
- 03** How do you feel about it?
- 04** How do you feel about the lockdown?
- 05** What are you doing during lockdown?

# HOW DID THE PROJECT RESPOND TO THE QUESTIONS?



This NPC Learning Brief summarises the children's responses under three broad categories:

- Children's responses to messaging about COVID-19
- Children's emotions during lockdown
- Children's feelings about lockdown and their lockdown activities

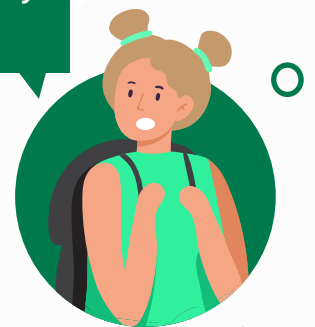
## CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO MESSAGING ABOUT COVID-19

The following quotations are representative of children's responses:



*"The coronavirus is a disease that came from China and caused us not to go to school because it is killing people."*  
- (VM, Limpopo, 13)

*"It is a pandemic and it spreads very fast and many people are dying from it. A lot have the virus. The symptoms are a fever, dry cough, a sore throat and sneezing."* - (EC, Western Cape, 12)



*"I know that it spreads through coughing and sneezing and that you should stay home to stop the spread of the coronavirus."* - (GV, Gauteng, 11)



Children had similar understandings of the origin, symptoms and effects of the virus which may point to the common sources of the messages – mostly their parents or the media and sometimes their teachers. Children also expressed strong trust in the words of the President which is characterised by this response:

**“MANY PEOPLE HAVE LOST THEIR LOVED ONES AND MANY PEOPLE DON'T LISTEN TO OUR PRESIDENT.”**

**- (IUM, WESTERN CAPE, 12)**

There was a **common thread** in children's responses: COVID-19 originated in China and it has had a global impact as it is an infectious disease. The history of different viral diseases and other more global factors that contribute to pandemics were absent from their knowledge and understanding.

Children seemed to understand that COVID-19 is a respiratory disease similar to the flu with symptoms such as fever, tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, sneezing and headaches. According to the children, there were dire consequences for those infected and they used the following words and phrases to describe **consequences of the pandemic**: sick, hospital, deadly, killing, losing people, and no cure. Respondents scarcely mentioned prospects of recovery.

There were a few misconceptions about the coronavirus such as the virus makes people sneeze blood, cough blood and blood comes out of the eyes and ears. Generally, children had heard the message that it was necessary to stay home to stop the virus from spreading.

They used phrases such as: you can't play with friends; you must sanitise your hands; wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap; practise social distancing; wear a mask; avoid touching your face; and cough and sneeze into your elbow.

The 'death-is-at-the-door' messaging delivered immediately prior to the hard lockdown may have scared people, especially children, into a fear response that, in the short term, justified why they should stay home.

However, the orientation of this messaging could affect children's mental well-being and their ability to transition out of the safety of their homes and reintegrate into schools and society after lockdown ends.



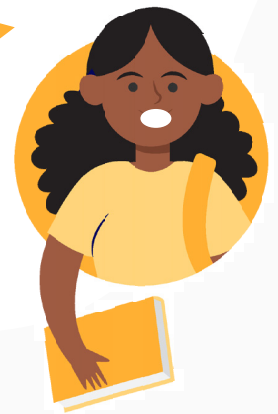
# CHILDRENS EMOTIONS DURING LOCKDOWN

These quotations illustrate some of the children's emotions during COVID-19.



*"I actually feel scared because the coronavirus is an infectious and deadly disease. There have been a lot of reports of deaths and high infectious rates overseas. So, I'm very scared and I'm just going to keep on praying for other people outside on the streets and also for my family and the rest of the world. This virus seems to be something that cannot be just joked about it." - (KM, Gauteng, 12)*

*"I feel it was a necessary step to take but I feel that another 21 days should not have been added because besides the spread, the more they add lockdown, the more us children suffer because I believe that we as South African children are the future. If you keep us tamed and keep us in our homes and keep us in lockdown, how do you think we feel? How do you think we will improve? You want us to rule South Africa and you want us to get knowledge for South Africa but if we keep being put in lockdown because of this virus we won't get any knowledge and know how to treat our country. We're not going to get knowledge on how to associate with other people in the country. And I think that's the reason I feel so sad about the lockdown." - (AL, KwaZulu-Natal, 13)*



*"This lockdown makes me feel unhappy because we are not going to school and we are worried about our examinations, we haven't learnt anything and online learning is not available for all of us. I'm worried about this lockdown because our parents are not working and we are running out of food. There will be nothing to eat soon and some others are being abused in their homes. Maybe some others haven't eaten for two to three days." - (AM, Western Cape, 15)*

The children experienced a wide range of negative emotions when they thought about the pandemic. These emotions included feeling bad, sad, not happy, bored, tired, disheartened, depressed, not good, stunned, weird, not well, stuck, disappointed and traumatised. A 5-year-old expressed feeling *“a little funny, my heart feels a little sore when I talk because I don’t know”*. (TPM, Gauteng, 5).

Children’s emotions were clearly weighing them down. Some expressed strong emotions such as hate, anger or feeling annoyed. Then there was the more disconcerting emotional space of anxiety; children said they felt scared, afraid, worried, terrified, stressed, unsafe, nervous, paranoid and concerned. Children were not only afraid for themselves and their own health – they were also especially anxious about losing loved ones.

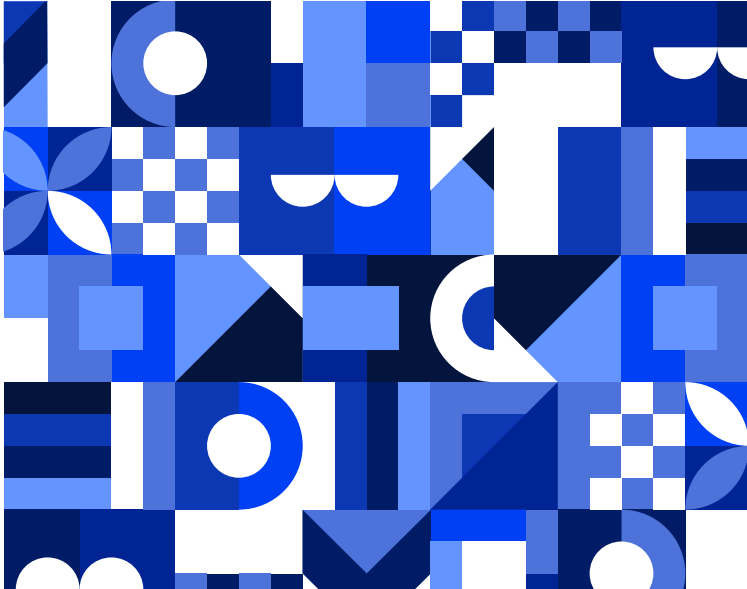
A 16-year-old said: *“I feel very scared because coronavirus is something you cannot see, and I’m afraid to lose my life and my loved ones which leads to me being paranoid which means I’m trying as much as I can to be clean.”* (TM, 16). The effects of sadness and anxiety on children’s future mental health should be cause for concern: the pandemic is an unusual stressor and children may need psychosocial support to cope during lockdown and as they reintegrate into more social spaces like schools and into the longer term.

These negative emotions were evoked by several factors but it was difficult to identify any particular reason to explain patterns of emotion. The following response could suggest the underlying reasons for children’s negative emotions: *“Things are disrupted and it’s causing everything to be a mess.”* (ZZ, Gauteng, 13). Children explained their unhappiness was a result of staying at home, no school, not seeing their teacher and feeling alone as they were unable to play with their friends and visit family.

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## **THINGS ARE DISRUPTED AND IT’S CAUSING EVERYTHING TO BE A MESS**

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This social isolation was felt keenly, especially by younger children and those living in confined spaces – some children are “staying in a room” with their whole families. Children were also keenly aware that nobody was allowed to go to work and this meant their parents may struggle to earn enough money to buy food and clothes. They were also sad and anxious about the prospect of themselves or loved ones being infected and then becoming sick as they were aware the virus could be fatal.

The children seemed to think it was an inevitable progression from getting infected with the virus, to becoming sick and then dying, as this was a dangerous virus; they did not want people to “suffer”. They were anxious about the future and concerned about surviving so they could “fulfil their dreams”. They wanted people to comply with the lockdown regulations so that they could be kept safe.

Children also hoped people would not spread false information that could negatively lead to risky behaviour which in turn might affect their own health and survival. Understandably, children seemed to apply straightforward reasoning that left no room for any nuances of understanding.

The three children in the sample who reported experiencing some positive emotions during lockdown – such as feeling grateful, normal or calm – gave short to-the-point responses to questions rather than elaborating on the reasons for their emotions.



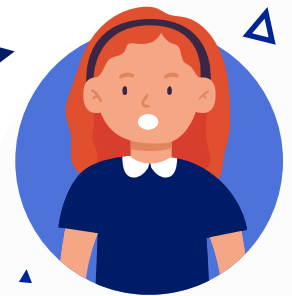
# CHILDREN'S FEELING ABOUT LOCKDOWN AND THEIR LOCKDOWN ACTIVITIES

These quotations provide characteristic examples of children's feelings about lockdown:



*"I think the lockdown was a good measure. I think South Africa is doing pretty well with its lockdown. Because it's showing good signs since it started. It has gotten ahead of the curve, it's flattening the curve. So, you can't be really that angry with the lockdown."*  
- (AV, Gauteng, 16)

*"President Ramaphosa did a big mistake about the lockdown because we must not stay at home too much."*  
- (LM, Limpopo, 10)



*"It's weird because I mostly go out, I'm a busy person. So, I hardly stay at home. This has taught me how nice it feels staying at home and spending time with loved ones."* - (LK)



The lockdown experience for children was like two sides of the same coin – both negative and positive. Some children reported the hard lockdown (i.e., where everyone except essential workers stayed at home) was a good, beneficial and necessary measure by the President.

As a result, they felt fine, free, happy, safe and protected. They could engage in activities such as playing with a sibling, doing homework, watching television and playing games, starting new hobbies, reading books and exercising.

The joy of bonding with family was a common sentiment when children lived in happy households. On the negative

side, children expressed many negative experiences and emotions as noted in the section above.

In summary, research findings highlight the importance of focusing on children's mental health during times of extreme and unusual stress, and of being guided by children when developing messages and interventions to help them cope with this stress.

Other participation projects that reached out to children drew similar findings to the NPC project.

# WHICH ORGANISATIONS WERE DOING SIMILAR

## CHILD PARTICIPATION WORK DURING LOCKDOWN?

Child participation organisations that also reached out to children during lockdown shared mini case studies with the NPC. Four organisations described their methods and findings:

- Media Monitoring Africa
- RX Radio
- ASSITEJ SA
- Children's Radio Foundation

### Case Study 1

Phakamile Khumalo provided the description of **Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)** work (<https://mediamonitoringafrika.org/>). She noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, children's right to freedom to receive or share information and ideas, as enshrined in Chapter 2 Article 16.1(b) of the Bill of Rights, was being marginalised even further.

On 28 April 2020, MMA launched a series of Children and COVID-19 webinars aimed at creating a platform for experts to provide easy-to-understand answers to children's important questions about this virus. Correct information about the virus will empower children.

Joy, a Grade 10 learner, reflected on how organisations need to **defend the rights of children** to participate: *"There are a lot of teens out there that have brilliant ideas and amazing life-changing solutions, but they don't have the platform to voice them. They don't have someone who is willing to listen to them."*

One webinar focused on understanding COVID-19 and another on the impact on learners of phasing in face-to-face schooling during the pandemic. Children, parents and teachers said that both **webinars were extremely successful**, with more than 40 children from across the country being given the opportunity to ask their questions to selected experts.

Matshidiso (Grade 11) said: *"If there's anything I've learnt in general, it is to have confidence and believe that every voice matters. That's also what I've noticed about these webinars – it doesn't matter who you are and where you're from, but when you have a question or opinion it is best to voice it. Had the opportunity not been brought forth, I honestly doubt I would know what I know today about the virus and all that concerns it. Thank you to everyone who made it a point that silent voices are heard and acknowledged."*

Even on a small scale, the impact of these webinars on young people is clear: Allowing children to set the agenda is a powerful tool to ensuring child participation. Watidaishe (Grade 12) said: *"The webinars gave me a platform and a voice to ask questions on behalf of the youth in South Africa."*

### Case Study 2

Christ Booth provided information about the child participation strategy in the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital Radio (RX Radio) programming. At the outbreak of COVID-19, RX Radio reporters began using WhatsApp voice notes and remote recording methods to gather content about the pandemic to educate and entertain their young listeners and families.

RX Radio provided support for two of their young reporters to broadcast live from home four times a week, and these reporters contributed to shows by sending WhatsApp voice notes for promotions, riddles and quizzes. Reporters also created public service announcements which have been translated into various languages, and they conducted interviews containing information about the COVID-19 pandemic and tips and advice on staying healthy and keeping



busy during the national lockdown.

RX Radio reporters shared how the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown is affecting children's lives. Content represented children living with chronic health conditions and children from a range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and they recorded voices of children from South Africa, China, the United Kingdom and Argentina. They also collected and edited interviews with parents, caregivers, and health care workers about their experiences to add to RX Radio COVID-19 programming.

RX Radio content is available for free on the website, with the audio being converted into videos. Reporters also used social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) to distribute and promote RX Radio COVID-19 programming ([www.rxradio.co.za/cornavirus](http://www.rxradio.co.za/cornavirus)). RX Radio material has been made available to other radio stations and health organisations.

Reporters and correspondents (children, parents/caregivers and health care workers) have appreciated being able to share their concerns on RX Radio, while listeners said programming has helped relieve stress during the pandemic and also boosted morale among the Red Cross Children's Hospital staff, patients and families.

### Case Study 3

Yvette Hardie from ASSITEJ SA provided information about their study. She reported that between 3 and 17 May 2020, ASSITEJ SA (<https://assitej.org.za/>) conducted a survey via WhatsApp and Google Forms with parents and caregivers asking them to interview their children around their feelings and responses to the national lockdown.

Responses came from rural, peri-urban and inner-city locations in Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Free State provinces. ASSITEJ SA found 50 per cent of respondents had some form of online access (e.g., through the phone of a parent). Most of the children were between the ages of 9 and 17 years, 24 per cent were between 14 and 15 years, and 18 per cent were between 9 and 10 years. Home languages included isiZulu, English, Setswana, Sesotho, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, siNdebele, Tshivenda and Xitsonga; in addition, sign language was included.

The children were asked a series of questions about what they were missing, what they enjoyed about lockdown and what their thoughts were on the future. Most of the respondents, no matter their age, said they are missing school and their friends, and being able to go out and play with others. They also miss their afterschool activities and the friends they interact with in those spaces. Very few respondents said that they did not want to be at school.

Some children responded that COVID-19 made them angry or sad because lockdown restrictions meant they could not do many of their usual activities. Other children mentioned being afraid of the virus and being worried about adults who were not respecting the lockdown. Some learners mentioned missing giving hugs to people, which shows their awareness of the impact of physical human contact on well-being.

**Teenage learners missed freedom or being free:** they felt caged in. They often used the word "frustration" in reference to mostly staying at home most of the time. The majority of the children would like their lives to go back to normal and for schools to reopen. A few teenagers feared failing their school grade and needing to repeat the year.

School work, television, helping with chores and playing take up most of their time. Many children are sent homework by their teachers via email, D6-App or WhatsApp and they are finding **online learning difficult**. Many children enjoy having their family members at home and spending quality time with them.

Although many respondents miss school, they enjoy not waking up early and having to follow a strict schedule. They are also enjoying playing, watching television and helping around the home. Some children are enjoying arts and crafts and new activities. But children worry about contracting the virus in the future or having friends and family fall ill.

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## THEY MISSED THE FREEDOM THAT COVID-19 TOOK AWAY FROM THEM.

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As the COVID-19 pandemic started spreading across South Africa in early March 2020, Clémence Petit-Perrot from Children's Radio Foundation (CRF) (<https://childrensradiofoundation.org/>) noted youth reporters did not want to put down their microphones as 17-year-old reporter Siyabonga Mokoena from Emalahleni in Mpumalanga explained: *"It's important that we carry on reporting, even if it's from the comfort of our own homes. Because we don't only produce award-winning shows, but we continue to serve and educate our fellow young people in the community about this coronavirus and how it affects us, and we keep them updated about the pandemic."*

In April, CRF organised a countrywide interactive live webinar on **WhatsApp** during which youth reporters asked questions about a new remote reporting and broadcasting model. Most youth reporters (86 per cent) said they now feel equipped to carry on producing their programmes.



The WhatsApp webinar groups are also used as platforms to share, support and ask peers and the CRF team questions. CRF shares weekly fact sheets and thematic guides on issues such as mental health and education during the pandemic.

The youth reporters used personal contacts and digital networks to identify potential guests and they conducted interviews via WhatsApp. Their mentors from the radio stations then edited the pre-recorded programmes and broadcasted these from the station.

In some instances, radio recorders used by youth reporters were replaced with smartphones because most reporters do not own their own smartphones and instead share phones with parents or other family members. CRF were also faced with an overwhelming demand for additional data to enable youth reporters to connect on their cellphones.

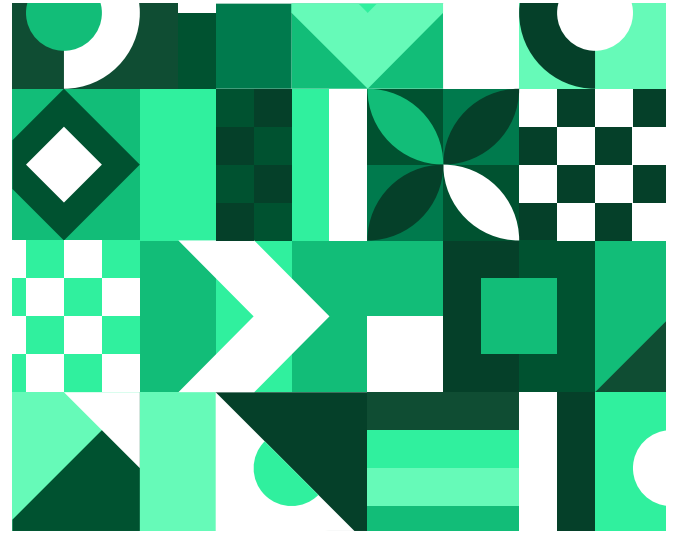
This shift in programme production from the physical to the digital collaborative space has been challenging, as Siyabonga outlined: *"The lockdown has really affected us young reporters. We cannot meet to plan for shows like we used to do, we cannot go out and conduct interviews or vox pops as we are now expected to do everything from our own homes. But in a way, this is how we lead by example, by adhering to the lockdown ourselves."*

Between mid-February and mid-May, 43 shows on COVID-19 and related issues had been produced and broadcast across the country. Issues tackled in programmes were diverse and included fake news and myths about COVID-19, online learning, youth mental health, family relationships during the lockdown, and the impact of the pandemic on the economy.

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These child participation projects showed the COVID-19 pandemic is a life-changing event in South Africa and globally. South Africa, like many other countries, approached the pandemic by instituting an early national lockdown. Through the Reaching out to Children During Lockdown project, the NPC was able to connect with children and record and reveal their feelings about the pandemic and lockdown, as well as describe how they spent their time. Other South African organisations conducted similar projects to reach out to children in lockdown. Their findings were remarkably similar and highlighted the value of raising children's voices. However, the Government of South Africa finds it extremely difficult to elicit and engage with children and consequently their voices are missing from governance in South Africa.

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# WERE THERE CHILD PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT?

During the first months of lockdown, a few international bodies created online platforms to engage with children and young people. For example, World Vision International conducted a study between March and April 2020 – Children's Voices in the Time of COVID-19: Continued child activism in the face of personal challenges – which explored reflections and perceptions of children and young people during the pandemic. (<https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/WV-Children%E2%80%99s%20voices%20in%20the%20time%20of%20COVID-19%20Final.pdf>)

UNICEF created the hashtag #voicesofyouth which recorded a selection of tweets shared by children and adolescents about their COVID-19 experiences. Young people's responses focused on their experiences of staying at home during the pandemic, such as schooling and learning at home and leisure activities. (<https://www.voicesofyouth.org/campaign/studying-home-due-coronavirus-how-young-people-around-world-are-keeping-their-mood#header--15081>)

There are international models of political leaders who talked with and listened to children during the pandemic.

For example, New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Arden understood that children needed extra help understanding the global pandemic, so she provided information directly to them during a special press conference: *"Kids ask a lot of questions most of the time, and right now they understandably have plenty about COVID-19 ... That's why we put on a press conference just for children and their questions ... I hope it will be a useful resource to help answer some of the questions from the young people in your life."* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/jacinda-ardern-holds-special-coronavirus-press-conference-for-children>)

In summary, there were initiatives around the globe that reached out to listen to children's thoughts and feelings about the pandemic and to learn about their activities during their countries' lockdowns. International organisations such as World Vision used online platforms to reach out to children, and Prime Minister Jacinda Arden was an example of a political leader who understood the need to directly engage directly with young people in New Zealand to help them cope.



# WHAT CAN THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT LEARN FROM THE NPC ABOUT HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH CHILDREN?

## The NPC learnt important lessons about how to successfully implement child participation projects:

- A skilled and experienced child participation specialist is vital.
- A political champion for child rights and political buy-in at the highest levels of the NPC ensured implementation of this Children's NDP project.
- A committed team of government officials who worked within the governance system made the project possible.
- Other Commissioners who invest passion and commitment in the project served to embed it within the NPC.
- Partnerships with reputable child rights organisations within the government and civil society enabled ethical project implementation.
- Reports provided feedback to all the partners and children who participated.

## In conclusion, this NPC Learning Brief makes the following recommendations for future planning and development of projects which promote children's participation in governance decision-making:

- Include a range of children across age, gender, race, class, disability, sexual orientation, geography and language, and refugees. Government, parliament, civil society, business, academia and media sectors should also be included.
- Create partnerships with well-established, trusted and credible institutions, agencies and organisations so children are supported throughout the participation process and have a reference for any follow-up questions, comments or concerns.
- Encourage children to be fully aware of the purpose of their participation, their role and the agenda and to contribute to the planned outputs.
- Create awareness among parents and caregivers of the purpose of children's participation, their roles, the agenda and planned outputs. Parents and caregivers must provide consent for their children's participation and must be kept updated about the process.
- Ensure that key outcomes of future participation projects highlight children as agents of change and active citizens.

