

EUROPEAN REGIONAL CONSULTATION MEETING SUMMARY

by the child rapporteur Tahera

New Optional Protocol to the CRC on Free
Pre-Primary and Secondary Education



On 28 March 2026, children from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom participated in a consultation to share their ideas and priorities regarding the new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on free pre-primary and secondary education. The consultation was led and facilitated by the Children's Advisory Team of Child Rights Connect.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DISCUSSIONS

What **difficulties** do children in your country face in attending preschool and secondary school?

Participants shared that even if education is officially free, many hidden costs make it difficult for children to attend - in different ways. These hidden costs include transportation to and from school, especially in rural areas, school uniforms, books and learning materials, meals during school hours, and sometimes exam or activity fees. For many families, especially those with low income, these costs are too high. As a result, some children attend school irregularly, while others drop out completely. In some cases, children are also required to work to support their families, which further limits their access to education.

"Hidden costs make education difficult."

"Price for food has increased. Friends sit at the canteen and look at others eating."

"These look like a small amount, but they add up."

"Families feel the social pressure to participate and pay for additional things for their children."

"If kids don't have the special books or supplies, they are called out by their teacher in front of the class... Then they might end up being bullied because of that."

"Some children cannot afford to buy lunch and others make fun of them. It is bullying which ruins their mental health."

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DISCUSSIONS 2.



Based on what we were talking about, is this Optional Protocol **important** for you (in Europe)? Is it important for other children in the world?

Participants agreed that the Optional Protocol is very important because it can help ensure that education is not only free in theory or on paper, but also in practice. The Protocol can encourage governments to take responsibility for removing both direct and indirect costs and to make education accessible for all children without discrimination.

Participants also expressed a sense of solidarity with children around the world who are still denied their right to education, emphasizing that supporting the Optional Protocol is a way of standing up for every child's right to quality education everywhere around the world.



"Parents could spend their money on other things, like the passions of their children like sports or music. Or to buy better cloths, food and devices"

"There is an increased reliance on technology at school, which is raising the costs."

"It is not only about the right to equal education, but about the right to the best education."

"We want all children in the world to have this as a basic minimum."

"All children should have access to equal conditions. When children are at bad consitions, it affects their mental health."

"It would build a stronger legal ground for children."

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DISCUSSIONS 3.



Now that you know about this Optional Protocol on free education, how do you think **children** in your country can help support and shape it?

The discussion also made it clear that children have an important role to play. Children can raise awareness in their communities by talking about the importance of free education. They can share their personal experiences to highlight real challenges. They can also take part in discussions, youth groups, and campaigns that focus on education rights. Some participants mentioned that children can work with organizations or schools to make their voices heard. It was strongly emphasized that children should be included in decision-making processes, as their experiences are important in shaping effective policies, in the policies that affect their lives and futures.

By sharing their experiences and making the decision makers understand what it's like not to have equal opportunities, raising awareness, and participating in discussions, they can help bring positive change. Listening to children's voices is essential in creating a more fair and inclusive education system.



“Children can share their own experience and decision-makers can benefit from that.”

“When children speak, they can make decision-makers understand their realities.”

“It is not true that we cannot change anything. Even small changes can solve a big problem.”

“We can raise awareness and make children understand the importance of it through social initiatives, using social media.”

“We are active participants in building this Optional Protocol.”

“You should advocate for things that matter to you!”

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