

[“From that day I felt ugly, ashamed, and stupid.”: countering the impact of abuse of children with disabilities through platforms of voice and agency](#)

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In 2021, Bongi and Sue were contracted by Kindernothilfe (KNH) to run training on safeguarding of children with disabilities for 22 NGOs in South Africa and Eswatini. As part of this process, they initiated a child participation element, where children themselves shared experiences and recommendations. Through this involvement, and under the auspices of the Disabled Children’s Action Group, the voices of children with disabilities – together with children without disabilities – were strengthened, as they were able to consolidate and articulate their experiences. It thus provided a catalyst for children’s confidence and advocacy skills to grow.

In August 2022, the South African government is due to report on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The compilation of an Alternate Report is being co-ordinated by the South African Disability Alliance, with a sub-group focusing on children. The timing of the UN reporting process coincides with the children’s desire to share their experiences and recommendations regarding safeguarding, and thus Sue & Bongi have undertaken additional focus groups and interviews with children with disabilities.

The objective of the engagements with children was to provide an opportunity for them to share their experiences of safeguarding and recommendations for addressing their challenges. The intention was to create safe spaces within which children could participate and be agents of change. Various tools were used to facilitate child participation, particularly for those using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and with intellectual disabilities. The process was strongly rooted in municipal structures and support services, including the availability of counselling for children.

Through the engagement with children, a number of key themes have emerged in respect of safeguarding. These include the practice of recruiting children with invisible disabilities as trainee sangomas (traditional healers) and the silent pandemic of verbal and physical abuse taking place in school hostels. But children have also given a range of deep-rooted and critical recommendations as to how safeguarding can be strengthened – beginning with their own involvement in awareness-raising on disability.

The inputs of the children are to be part of the Alternate Report from civil society, to be submitted to the Committee on the CRPD, and thus will be considered on an international level. In addition, the report generated from the engagements with children will inform local advocacy within municipal, district and provincial structures in KwaZulu Natal. Now children have written their own script.