

Children's rights – looking ahead with 2020 vision

Key points arising from the conference held in Edinburgh, 23rd February 2010

The conference was organised by Children in Scotland in partnership with Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People and in association with Children in Europe, Eurochild, Save the Children Scotland and the Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights. Its purpose was to enable policy makers and practitioners to consider the issues raised by Children in Europe's examination of what the UNCRC has meant for children, identify key outstanding implementation issues and consider what children's rights could and should mean in practice by 2020.

Chaired by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Tam Baillie, speakers included Kay Tisdall, programme director MSc Childhood Studies, University of Edinburgh; Agata d'Addato, policy officer, Eurochild; Gianfranco Zavalloni, Consolato d'Italia Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Colin Morrison, co-director, The Children's Parliament; Helen Penn, Professor of Early Childhood, University of East London; Afua Twum-Danso, lecturer in Sociology of Childhood, University of Sheffield; Douglas Hamilton, head of Save the Children Scotland; Kelly Bayes, chair of the Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights; and Des McNulty MSP, shadow cabinet secretary for education.

Children from Craighead Primary School provided input on a DVD highlighting their thinking and class work on the topic of children's rights, and students from the School of Design at Edinburgh College of Art provided graphic recordings of the day's discussions in the form of illustrations of ideas, proposals and decisions.

Among the key points raised were:

- Governments at Scottish, UK and European level all explicitly favour children's rights, but make very slow progress in translating this into strategies, policies and practice that make a practical difference to children's lives. Scotland, the UK and Europe still have a long way to go.

- It was recognised that the UNCRC has made a major contribution, providing a common international language for the discussion of children's rights and a context within which discussion can take place. However experiences from South Africa and Ghana highlighted that in some parts of the world the UNCRC is seen as a product of Western culture and needs to be made more relevant to local experiences and culture. It was suggested that initiating two-way dialogue to involve and educate local communities in the children's rights agenda is one way of keeping it relevant and strong.
- In 2009 in Stockholm calls were made for an ambitious EU strategy on the rights of the child. Protection of the rights of the child is mentioned in articles in the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, while new European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Viviane Reding has declared her intention of enhancing the EU strategy for children.
- With the anticipated challenge facing Scotland in terms of resources over the next 10 year, it was suggested that the UNCRC might offer a useful framework in helping determine the allocation of resources.
- There is a considerable and ongoing need to share good practice. The conference heard of numerous examples including the relatively unknown libraries project run by the Youth Issues Unit in Dumfries & Galloway that directly involves young people.
- It was recognised that the UNCRC itself doesn't necessarily provide answers (in some circumstances specific rights may conflict, e.g. to keep a child safe versus the right to contact with a parent), but it provides a framework to make decisions in the best interests of the child.
- Children's rights are part of human rights but require separate recognition owing to the vulnerability of children and their dependence on adults for the ability to exercise their rights.
- Eurochild is calling for the EU strategy on the rights of the child setting a framework and general principles for promoting and protecting children's rights in all EU action; mainstreaming children's rights in policy and legislation; and supporting implementation of the UNCRC in Member States, e.g. through mutual learning and exchange.
- Children should be visible at a society level and core values created that see children as a shared responsibility in the present and a social investment for the future.

How implementation can be moved forward:

- By developing a shared understanding of what constitutes children's rights and a shared aspiration to see them implemented. It is considered essential that an understanding of children's rights be mainstreamed and popularised among children themselves and their parents, and through policymakers and professional organisations. This may include cross sectoral training, teaching, and providing information to everyone whose work touches children's lives – e.g. health, justice, social services, education, local and national government.

- Highlighting the distinction between children's needs and children's rights, reinforcing the message that adopting children's rights helps to improve the situation for all, long term, and understanding children as active participants in this process.
- Scots law needs to be fully UNCRC compatible, and the UNCRC needs to be incorporated more within a legal framework that is enforceable by judges who better understand the issues.
- A reporting and monitoring process should be established to ensure governments and organisations are accountable for what they agree to implement.
- A place for shared training and greater sharing of information among bodies that work with and for children is required.
- Building good models of participation, so children's views are routinely included in consultation processes: this has been a feature of other civil rights movements.
- Consider how best to use the material that does represent children's views, so that these feed into processes rather than becoming part of a tokenistic exercise.
- Build the capacity of structures already in place, e.g. pupil councils, to feed into processes more effectively.
- Establish a children's conference, with minimum adult involvement.
- Find ways for children and young people to participate in processes: e.g. children and young people with experience of the Children's Hearings System could be involved by a) helping to train panel members and b) preparing other children and young people for involvement in a hearing.
- Prevent the rights agenda from becoming institutionalised and recognise that there is a long-term education need including the education of children in the rights agenda in their capacity as tomorrow's parents.

Looking to the future:

The UNCRC was developed by adults. Would it have been different if developed by children? What are children's priorities? Observation of young children led to the development of the charter of natural children's rights in Brazil with an emphasis on rights such as the right to get dirty and the right to the street. In a project undertaken by the Children's Parliament in Scotland children identified as the most important issues affecting children's lives today: unhappy families; problems with schools and teachers; not enough to do; being unsafe in the community; and bullying.

The point was made that by 2020 we might be working towards a global vision and global concerns about the position of children.

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