



Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Summary record of the 2330th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Friday, 28 September 2018, at 5 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Aho Assouma (Vice-Chair)

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In the absence of the Chair, Ms. Aho Assouma, Vice-Chair, took the chair.

The meeting was called to order at 5.05 p.m.

Day of General Discussion: Protecting and Empowering Children as Human Rights Defenders *(continued)*

Presentation by rapporteurs to plenary of working groups' conclusions

1. **The Chair** invited Mr. Brattskar, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva, to act as moderator.
2. **Mr. Brattskar** (Norway) invited the three rapporteurs to present the key learnings and recommendations arising from the discussions in their respective working groups.
3. **Ms. Sandberg** (Rapporteur for Working Group 1) said that the Working Group on online space had engaged in very interesting and inspiring discussions throughout the day on a wide range of topics.
4. The first session had been devoted to civil society space for children human rights defenders. The Working Group had noted that information technology had become an integral part of policymaking and had created previously unknown possibilities. Mention had been made, for instance, of campaigns such as the #HomeToVote campaign on marriage equality in Ireland that had used online platforms. The Working Group had recommended that States should learn from the best practices of other States in that regard. Governments should also create the space for youth to work with adults in order to bridge the intergenerational digital divide that could result from fast-moving technological change.
5. During the session on empowerment through digital media, it had been noted that in Brazil digital media were used by the United Nations to spread information so as to enable small, far-flung community groups to work together on issues of importance and to raise them with the authorities. The point had been made that children should be involved in creating child-friendly versions of any documents used in such contexts. In that connection, the Council of Europe had recently adopted new recommendation on guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment, which had been inspired by the Committee's 2014 Day of General Discussion on digital media and children's rights.
6. The Working Group had recommended during the session on child-led initiatives and protection online that children should take their own initiatives and create their own platforms, where they would be more secure than when using major social media networks. However, a challenge in that regard was dealing with legislation on protecting privacy. With regard to protection more generally, education was of critical importance. In that connection, States should organize programmes for children on how to protect themselves online; but ultimately children needed to use their own judgment.
7. In its discussions on the issue of empowering and protecting children human rights defenders of vulnerable groups, the Working Group had noted that child protection clubs for victims of sexual exploitation had been effective in India in raising awareness among friends and peers of the dangers of online grooming and other issues. Moreover, the clubs' collective voice was louder than an individual voice when approaching the authorities and community leaders.
8. Indigenous children who were human rights defenders used online spaces to share and maintain their language and culture. The use of online apps helped those children to find a voice and follow their own path. However, challenges persisted in some countries, in particular in remote areas where neither the Internet nor appropriate devices were available.
9. In the last session of the day, which had focused on children human rights defenders with disabilities, participants had explained how they used major digital platforms to communicate, share stories and campaign for their rights. The right to associate and create online groups was extremely important for children with disabilities. An application should be made available to provide answers to frequently asked questions, such as how to respond to an insult. The Working Group had recommended that all information and

communication should be available online in various forms and be inclusive so as to enable children with, for example, visual or hearing impairments to participate fully.

10. **Mr. Mezmur** (Rapporteur for Working Group 2) said that the discussions on the theme of State actors had been informative and inspiring. The following topics had been addressed: national protection measures for child human rights defenders; the participation of children in public affairs and freedom of assembly and association; children human rights defenders in armed conflict and humanitarian situations; the role of the legislature and children's parliament; children human rights defenders in alternative care; and the role of ombudspersons for children and national human rights institutions. While structured, the conversations had not been limited to any particular right within the Convention.

11. The Working Group had discussed the role of various institutions and strategies aimed at empowering children human rights defenders with a view to realizing their potential. In that regard, it had been pointed out that children should be included in the design of strategies that would affect them. The Group had noted that very few States parties had specific legislation to protect human rights defenders, fewer still to protect children human rights defenders.

12. With respect to the participation of children in public affairs, the role of drama, school plays and child parliaments in allowing children's voices to be heard had been emphasized. An example had been shared concerning a group of children who had written a report on a project that was likely to impact negatively on their lives and then shared their findings with the authorities concerned. The Working Group had discussed the multiple discrimination that could be faced by children human rights defenders in situations of armed conflict.

13. The role of the legislature and children's parliaments had been discussed at some length, with the phrase "nothing about us without us" as a recurring mantra. Much emphasis had been placed on the importance of education as a tool for empowering children to exercise their rights. Attention had been brought in that connection to the challenges faced by, among others, children from rural areas, children with disabilities and children with autism. Other issues discussed had included voting age, children's access to national human rights institutions and the extent to which their views were taken into account by those institutions.

14. In conclusion, he noted the emphasis that had been placed on the need to draw on experience at the local, regional and international levels in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the challenges facing and the opportunities for the empowerment of children human rights defenders. The Working Group had repeatedly underscored that children were agents of change and that they were part of the solution to the social, economic and cultural challenges faced by States.

15. **Ms. Skelton** (Rapporteur for Working Group 3) said that Working Group 3, on non-State actors, had first dealt with the issues of freedom of speech and violence in school. One child representative had said that school was a place where children could express themselves and that they should speak up when they were there. Another had said that educational methods were outdated and that she dreamt of a school that would train her for life and listen to her story. Children human rights defenders could help children who were not in school to express themselves through street events and theatre performances in their communities.

16. The second discussion had focused on the role of business and donors. Child representatives had pointed out that many businesses were exploiting young people, harming the environment and producing weapons. A business sector representative present at the meeting had reminded children of their enormous power as buyers of goods. They were free to choose not to purchase goods produced by businesses that violated children's rights.

17. The final morning session had addressed empowerment through reporting to and monitoring by the Committee. Participants had discussed how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) liaised between children and the Committee. It had been observed

that, while children were submitting reports to the Committee, they could become more involved.

18. In the afternoon sessions, the Working Group had first discussed empowerment through transitional justice. It had heard a fascinating presentation on how justice protected against impunity and how children who had committed crimes during an armed conflict could still change and be reintegrated into communities.

19. The next session had addressed the question of how best to support girls who were human rights defenders. One participant had powerfully described how she had fought against the sexual exploitation of girls in communities and schools, how some issues, such as female genital mutilation, were particularly difficult to talk about and how civil society organizations and NGOs could be involved to bring about change.

20. In the final session of the day, on environmental children human rights defenders, it had been noted that environmental impacts disproportionately affected the poorest communities. It had been pointed out that to become an activist was to challenge the powerful, that the space for human rights defenders was shrinking and that they needed support. One child representative had concluded his presentation by observing that impatient youth were needed to make adults see what was happening to the earth.

Concluding comments

21. **Mr. Gastaud** said that the best way to defend children, children's rights and children human rights defenders was to implement the Convention. The organization of the Day of General Discussion had exemplified implementation of article 12 of the Convention by allowing children to express their views freely at the preparatory meetings that had been held at the national, regional and international levels in Scotland, the Philippines and Switzerland respectively. The opinions expressed, recommendations made and demands put forward by the child representatives at those meetings basically covered three areas. First, the commitment to defend child rights should be a free personal choice and based on knowledge of the Convention and its legal effects in terms of the lives of children. Unfortunately, such knowledge was often lacking because children's rights were not being properly taught in schools. Secondly, children human rights defenders must be able to act in safety, protected from threats and reprisals. Regrettably, that was not the case in many countries. They must be taken seriously by adults and must have access to the information needed to enable them to take part in decision-making processes on an equal basis. Thirdly, adults should help children exercise the role of human rights defenders and should participate in meetings called by children on topics chosen by them. They must not try to circumscribe the role of children human rights defenders, but must recognize that it was shaped by children's imagination and creativity.

22. **Mr. Forst** (Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders) said that he had been impressed by the quality of the presentations and recommendations made during the discussions.

23. In the light of the information and testimonies shared, he wished to make a number of commitments. When undertaking visits to States parties, he would remind Governments that United Nations provisions on human rights defenders applied equally to young human rights defenders, who had the right, under the Convention, to criticize their Governments, put forward proposals and assemble and express themselves freely, either individually or as groups. Young persons also had the inalienable right to be consulted on any new provisions that involved changes to the status of children. In his role as Special Rapporteur, he would make efforts to ensure that Governments upheld the rights of children and would devote a chapter of each country report to the issue of young human rights defenders.

24. He also wished to make some recommendations. Young human rights defenders should be attentive to the issue of gender, which was not given equal attention in every country or in every organization. He was concerned to note that, in many organizations including those represented in the room, women were restricted to subordinate roles.

25. Young defenders should also pay attention to efforts to protect and enforce sexual and reproductive rights and rights associated with sexuality and gender identity. In that regard, they should not hesitate to call on the assistance of the Independent Expert on

protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

26. In order to avoid becoming isolated, it was important for human rights defenders to work in a cross-cutting manner by establishing links with other sectors. The world of human rights needed to recruit new activists and forge links with the media, the business sector and academia.

27. He hoped that the Day of General Discussion would be the start of a process and that future meetings would shortly be held to determine how the recommendations made would be implemented. He would use his mandate to promote the work of young human rights defenders and protect them against any reprisals that they might face as a result of cooperating with the United Nations system. Any persons facing such reprisals should not hesitate to contact the Human Rights Council Secretariat, which would make every effort to protect them.

28. The Norwegian Nobel Committee would shortly be choosing the winners of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize. A number of organizations, supported by some States, were campaigning for the prize to be awarded to the community of human rights defenders. If that campaign was successful, it was hoped that a young human rights defender would be able to attend the award ceremony in Oslo.

29. **Mr. Pedernera Reyna** said that the Day of General Discussion had been an emotional one replete with new life, experiences and hope. It was interesting to note that the discussions had been watched online by over 400,000 people in 33 countries around the world.

30. The Committee wished to express its gratitude to the children present at the meeting, who had been working for over a year to make the Day possible. Their testimonies had highlighted that children were concerned about violence, poverty, discrimination, lack of access to education and justice. Children had made it clear that they wished to be protagonists and have their views taken into account. For its part, the Committee made efforts to listen to children on days such as the present one, in the preparation of its general comments and in pre-sessional meetings.

31. In conclusion, he wished to say that children benefited the Committee even more than the Committee benefited children.

32. **Ariadna** (Children's Advisory Team) said that the participants in the Day of General Discussion had heard shocking stories and discussed recommendations and issues that needed to be addressed.

33. In her country, the Republic of Moldova, acts of domestic violence were sometimes committed, and the right to quality education and health care was not always upheld. A number of children in Moldova acted as human rights defenders and were committed to increasing access to education and health care and eliminating violence from society. Such defenders promoted human rights and proposed policies in order to help the Government draft appropriate legislation. The children in question were not afraid to speak out when they saw something that they disagreed with and were not prepared to wait until they reached 18 years of age before voicing their opinion. When acts of violence were committed, children were often the victims and adults were often the aggressors. As both children and adults were human beings, with minds, souls and consciences, it was difficult to explain why they should be in conflict with each other.

34. Although she was frequently criticized for voicing her opinion, she wished to say that her generation put their hearts into making the world a better place and had the power to change lives.

35. **Diana** (Children's Advisory Team) said that she was sad to note that many of the children would not have been present at the meeting if they had not suffered harrowing experiences.

36. Although few people in her country, El Salvador, were aware of the Day of General Discussion, she believed that everyone should know about the Day taking place, just as all children should be aware of their rights. She was able to defend her rights because she was

familiar with them and was therefore empowered. She was not a human rights defender simply because she was present at the meeting, or because some people knew her name, but because she had taken a critical view of the issues facing the world. She felt respected as a human rights defender because, unlike at school, people were willing to listen to her and take her opinions into account.

37. In many parts of the world, children and adolescents were in danger. In El Salvador, children were beaten by the police or abused because of the clothes that they wore or the area where they happened to live. For that reason, the Day of General Discussion was a historic occasion for many people. The children present at the meeting would make efforts to raise awareness of it and ensure that more children around the world participated in discussions concerning them. It was necessary to continue meeting, debating and monitoring violations of children's rights because those violations would continue to occur.

38. **Sameer** (Children's Advisory Team) said that, since 2015, he had been involved in efforts to promote and protect children's rights, especially the right to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. He was honoured to participate in the Day of General Discussion on behalf of millions of Pakistani children.

39. He wished to urge States parties to consider developing plans and strategies aimed at empowering children to act as informed human rights defenders. It was necessary to encourage States parties to create safe spaces in which children could express their views without fear or hesitation. He expressed the hope that, following the Day of General Discussion, important stakeholders would develop concrete action plans that would protect and empower children as human rights defenders.

40. **Mr. Brattskar** (Norway) said that the protection of human rights defenders of all ages would continue to be a priority for the Government of Norway. In that regard, the discussions had thrown up interesting ideas about how to protect and empower children human rights defenders. During the meetings, the participants had learned how essential it was to ensure that children's voices were heard and taken into account. It was clear that children human rights defenders had much to contribute through their efforts to promote and protect human rights.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.