

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is 20 years old: should we celebrate?

1. We know that the rights enshrined in the Convention are far from being a reality for every child in the world. It would be enough to remember that every few seconds, one child dies in the world from preventable causes. Every one of us here, whatever the country and context we come from, can give proof to the fact that the rights are not a reality for every child. So, I will not try to draw the bleak picture with sad statistics.

A couple of weeks ago, a friend sent me a poem, and while I was reading it I thought: These few words speak volumes, and I decided to share it with you instead. It was written by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish who died last year. It is my own translation from Arabic.

We are still alive: don't hold a remembrance for us.

*They don't look forward to say farewell to exile
For ahead of them is exile.*

*They're now familiar
With the circular road: no ahead,
No behind, no North, no South...
They transit from homes to streets
Waving their wounded victory sign
To those who see them
"We're still alive: don't hold a remembrance for us."*

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*I was born and my mother was not with me
She was searching for my brother's whereabouts
A family reunion in prison*

I was born and my mother was not near me

*She was seeing off my father
Organising his last journey
Folding his body in the earth*

*I was born and I wasn't there
I was born and I, I was not with me
Neither the place knows me, nor my mother gives me birth
Nor my father passes on his name to me, no brother to wave
At me from behind... from behind metal bars*

*I was born without a pretty cord.
I was born, and I am born again and again...
And the land is not my homeland.*

Darwish was describing the predicament of Palestinian newborns. But his words also apply to newborns in every exile, displacement, disaster, or indeed in any poverty situation in the world.

2. So, the Convention's rights are not a reality for every child, should we celebrate?

Yes we should!

We should celebrate **the sheer existence of the Convention**, as a set of standards that we have set for ourselves. As you all know, it is the only Convention that has been signed and ratified by all countries of the world, except Somalia and the USA. Somalia, who has managed to sign, but not ratify the Convention, is one of those places on earth where practically every child can make the words of Mahmoud Darwish their own. It has been without a stable political structure for such a long time that the fact that they have not ratified the CRC does not have a real significance. But the USA?

This is of course a complex issue. I think it is worth spending a few seconds on the major objection to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is put forward mostly by some of the religious circles, not only within the Christian tradition, but also the Islamic and other faith traditions. This objection is at the core of the position of those who

oppose the signing of the Convention in the US. They say that the construct of rights that underpins the Convention goes against the primary responsibility of parents. This is of course a fallacy. The Convention gives a key role to the family in upholding the rights of children, and we, the early childhood community, we know that **the best interest of the child, a leading principle of the Convention, cannot be achieved without working with the family.**

I am sure you all receive and read Exchange Everyday and that you have noted as I did a few days ago, the abstract of Anne Mitchell's article published in the May issue of **Exchange** magazine: "4 Good Reasons Why ECE Is Not Just Important, But Essential." Let me quote just one of the arguments:

As early childhood educators and advocates, we know that early childhood matters. It's what we do every day with children... We know that families are the strongest influence on young children, and when early childhood educators partner with families, children do better.

3. So yes, we should celebrate. Because in our efforts to promote and use the Convention to improve the status of children around the world, **we have been scoring victories**, maybe small victories, but they are important advances on our long journey towards our goal.

3.1 For example, talking of the US, the signing of the CRC is now back on the agenda, with the Obama administration. I have just learned from colleagues from the US that on the second of June, a strong coalition of advocates have come together again to refresh their strategy for lobbying the administration on this matter. Of course, this competes with other important issues on the desk of the President, but I think we can call it a "victory in waiting".

3.2 Here is another recent victory, more global this one: Last month, **UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon appointed Marta Santos Pais** (ex-director of UNICEF's Innocenti Centre) **as a**

Special Representative on Violence Against Children.

This happened after three years of sustained lobbying by child rights advocates, following the global study on the same issue.

(And I have just learned, that the European component of that same lobby, who have succeeded in pushing forward this appointment, have launched the European Platform for Children's Rights, which brings together government representatives, Council of Europe experts, civil society, ombudspersons, international organisations, researchers and individual experts to share information and experience on children's rights, including on violence and corporal punishment.)

4. But again, I have to ask the question: should we celebrate? **By we, I now mean us, the early childhood movement** so well represented here. Have we been doing enough to make this occasion a cause for celebration?

I had the privilege for a few years to work both with Child Rights and Early childhood communities: I was on the management team of the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN, by the way, for those of you who may not know, is the first port of call for any information about Child Rights, at CRIN.ORG), and on the Board of the Consultative Group for Early Childhood. I can tell you that the overlap and interaction between the two communities of civil society organisations, professionals and advocates are limited. If one looks at the programme of the Forum here, one can find one session or two which indicate that link are being developed. Is that enough, as we celebrate 20 years of the Convention? I can tell you without hesitation that we, advocates for early childhood, we have to do much more for the promotion and implementation of the CRC.

We have no excuse. Because we have a very good reason why we should work harder on this front: **It's General Comment N° 7: 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'**. I will give you the benefit of the doubt and trust that most, if not all of you know about it (and if you don't, visit either CRIN, or the website of the CG at ecdgroup.com). GC7 adds one specific tool related exclusively to

early childhood, in the panoply of methods established around the Convention to work with our governments for the rights of young children.

GC7 is our own small victory. It was adopted on 30 September 2005, after a two-year process in preparation of the Day of General Discussion that preceded the 40th session of the Committee. A lot of studies and lobbying were invested by the early childhood community in the process to bring about GC7.

It is difficult to summarise what it is about. Let me just quote the first of the seven objectives of GC7: ***To strengthen understanding of the human rights of all young children and to draw States parties' attention to their obligations towards young children.*** Let me also say that GC7 pays special attention to parental responsibilities.

And by the way, one of the key people working with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child told a colleague in the CG recently that GC7 had generated the most active interest among all General Comments issued by the UN Committee, including a dedicated working group. The UN Committee mandated this group to produce a set of indicators that can be used in the reporting system, and a guide on how to collect information about them.

5. So, again, should we celebrate? Yes we should.

But while we do celebrate, **we still have a lot to do.** Let's engage, both at the national and global levels, in the mechanisms that the Convention gives us to continuously improve both the policy and practice on the rights of young children within our countries.

I would like to mention two mechanisms in particular that I think are important, and are not used by us, early childhood activists, certainly not enough. I have worked on this issue in Africa and the Arab region, and in both cases I can confirm that they are not.

5.1 The first and perhaps more important mechanism is **the reporting system**. The UN Committee on the CRC receives periodic reports from every country that has ratified the Convention, both from government and civil society organisations. The Committee responds with what is called “General Observations”, pointing out where improvements are necessary and possible, and then calls the governments to account in the next report.. I challenge you: go and examine the reporting process between the UN Committee and your country. I am sure very few of us, if at all, would be satisfied that reasonable attention has been given to early childhood in this exchange, in spite of General Comment 7.

5.2 The second mechanism is the express provision by the Convention for civil society organisations to present our own “**alternative report**”, as counter evidence on the claims of the government. In this context, the formation of **coalitions of NGOs** is encouraged. Here is another challenge: how many of our organisations are playing an active role in such coalitions, and where they do not exist, in being a catalyst for their emergence? Isn't this an effective way for driving the Early Childhood agenda within our countries?

So, here is my **invitation to us all, and particularly to the Global Leaders**, those who have graduated and those who have just started their journey with us: Let's all commit ourselves to engage in the process of exchanges between our countries and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, for improving the national policies for young children.

On our behalf all, I will borrow again the words of Mahmoud Darwish: “we are alive, don't hold a remembrance for us”. Not yet, for we still have a lot to do!

But for tonight, yes let's celebrate.