

Protecting children's rights

Human rights apply to all age groups; children have the same general human rights as adults. In 1989, however, world leaders decided that children needed a special convention just for them because people under 18 years old often need special care and protection that adults do not. The leaders also wanted to make sure that the world recognized that children have human rights too. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—including civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.

Children's rights in the human rights framework

The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the rights that must be realized for children to develop their full potential, free from hunger and want, neglect and abuse. It reflects a new vision of the child. Children are neither the property of their parents nor are they helpless objects of charity. They are human beings and are the subject of their own rights. The Convention offers a vision of the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development. By recognizing children's rights in this way, the Convention firmly sets the focus on the whole child.

The Convention and its acceptance by so many countries has heightened recognition of the

fundamental human dignity of all children and the urgency of ensuring their well-being and development. The Convention makes clear the idea that a basic quality of life should be the right of all children, rather than a privilege enjoyed by a few.

From abstract rights to realities

Despite the existence of rights, children suffer from poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, preventable diseases, unequal access to education and justice systems that do not recognize their special needs. These are problems that occur in both industrialized and developing countries.

The near-universal ratification of the Convention reflects a global commitment to the principles of children's rights. By ratifying the Convention, governments state their intention to put this commitment into practice. State parties are obligated to amend and create laws and policies to fully implement the Convention; they must consider all actions taken in light of the best interests of the child.

The task, however, must engage not just governments but all members of society. The standards and principles articulated in the Convention can only become a reality when they are respected by everyone—within the family, in schools and other institutions that provide services for children, in communities and at all levels of administration.

Addressing the needs of children

Governments must respect the rights of all their citizens—not only those of children—but the global community gives priority to protecting children's rights.

There are many reasons for singling out children's rights in a separate human rights Convention:

Children are individuals. Children are neither the possessions of parents nor of the state, nor are they mere people-in-the-making; they have equal status as members of the human family.

Children start life as totally dependent beings. Children must rely on adults for the nurture and guidance they need to grow towards independence. Such nurture is ideally found in adults in children's families, but when primary caregivers cannot meet children's needs, it is up to society to fill the gap.

The actions, or inactions, of government impact children more strongly than any other group in society. Practically every area of government policy (for example, education, public health and so on) affects children to some degree. Short-sighted policymaking that fails to take children into account has a negative impact on the future of all members of society by giving rise to policies that cannot work.

Children's views are rarely heard and rarely considered in the political process. Children generally do not vote and do not otherwise take part in political

processes. Without special attention to the opinions of children—as expressed at home and in schools, in local communities and even in governments—children's views go unheard on the many important issues that affect them now or will affect them in the future.

Many changes in society are having a disproportionate, and often negative, impact on children. Transformation of the family structure, globalization, shifting employment patterns and a shrinking social welfare net in many countries all have strong impacts on children. The impact of these changes can be particularly devastating in situations of armed conflict and other emergencies.

The healthy development of children is crucial to the future well-being of any society. Because they are still developing, children are especially vulnerable—more so than adults—to poor living conditions such as poverty, inadequate health care, nutrition, safe water, housing and environmental pollution. The affects of disease, malnutrition and poverty threaten the future of children and therefore the future of the societies in which they live.

The costs to society of failing its children are huge. Social research findings show that children's earliest experiences significantly influence their future development. The course of their development determines their contribution, or cost, to society over the course of their lives.

https://www.unicef.org/crc/index_protecting.html