

Foreword

The past decade has witnessed striking legal advances for the rights of children everywhere. Today, virtually all States are bound by international law to respect, protect and promote the human rights of children. The next step is implementation of those rights 'in small places, close to home...'

The Convention on the Rights of the Child established an innovative approach to human rights, marking a departure from earlier instruments and from traditional notions of child welfare. It was the first international human rights treaty to contain a comprehensive set of universally recognised norms, asserting the complementarity and interdependence of human rights: civil and political, economic, social and cultural. Above all, the Convention set a new vision of the child, embodying a consensus that emerged in favour of the empowerment, as well as protection, of children.

Traditionally, States have been seen to be the most important actors in the human rights arena: only States can ratify the Convention and only States can be bound by its provisions. However, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has had a clear impact on the programmes and priorities of the United Nations system. And from its earliest stages, the Convention has attracted the involvement of non-governmental organisations, whose commitment has been demonstrated by activities to implement children's rights internationally and locally. Indeed, the Convention specifically recognises the participation rights of NGOs in its implementation. Moreover, in recent years there is increasing recognition in business circles that they too have an important role to play in the implementation of child rights.

Recent developments furthering the protection of children, notably the Optional Protocols to the Convention concerning children in armed conflict, and the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; ILO Convention No. 182 on the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour; and the Statute of the International Criminal Court have kept child rights on the political agenda. And, for the first time in its history, the Security Council adopted a resolution concerning children, Resolution 1261 (1999) on children and armed conflict.

Unfortunately, despite increased international and national efforts, enormous problems remain. The rights of millions of children all over the world are violated every day, in every conceivable way. The litany is endless; girls and children with disabilities continue to experience discrimination; children are subject to all forms of ill-treatment, often at the hands of those who are expected to have their best interests at heart; they languish in prisons without adequate legal safeguards, are sold and forced into prostitution; and are victims of armed conflict.

While some States have made progress, others have made no more than symbolic gestures without creating an effective infrastructure of implementation and monitoring reaching down to the local level. Inroads are being made here

with the emergence of independent national human rights institutions. In addition, human rights education – a crucial long-term contributor to prevention of human rights abuses, and an investment towards the building of a universal culture of human rights – is a priority that needs to be given increased attention through national, regional and international endeavours.

With a decade behind us since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the time is right to evaluate progress, re-assess strategies, and tackle the challenges that lie ahead through concrete and effective action. This collection of essays, drawn from the lecture series at the University of London, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Convention is an important contribution to the collective efforts towards making the Convention an everyday reality. For all those who are committed to child rights, this book will be a valuable resource.

At the start of a new century, everyone must assume their rightful ownership of the Convention. The promotion and protection of children's rights should be at the heart of all our endeavours.

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United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
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