



On the Record for Children

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Welcome to On the Record for Children

On the Record for Children is a publication of the Advocacy Project, a group that was established in 1998 to make the new information technology more accessible to advocates working on the frontline of peace and human rights.

Consistent with this goal, the Advocacy Project has developed an e-mail newsletter - On the Record - which it uses to provide online coverage of advocacy. This can range from covering conferences to profiling community-based campaigns. Fifteen series have been produced to date. In addition to this series on children, a series is currently being distributed on Palestinian civil society.

In January, the Advocacy Project was approached by the Steering Committee of the NGO Committee on UNICEF, and asked to cover the Special Session and its two remaining Preparatory Committee meetings.

Six issues of On the Record for Children were produced for the second PrepCom in January in partnership with UK-based Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) and Children's Express.

Viewpoint: Future Generations are Watching

Over the next week the eyes of the world will be focused on the third Preparatory Committee meeting of the Special Session here at the UN.

The battle lines have been drawn.

The United States is certainly gearing up for a fight. The US delegation launched an assault on the concept of child rights at the last PrepCom, when it basically insisted that children have no legal entitlements. This time around the US is fielding a large delegation which includes several 'pro-life and pro-family' advocates. They are -- by their own admission -- enemies of the child rights agenda that is supported by the vast majority of nongovernmental organizations participating in this process.

This week's debate will give everyone plenty of opportunity to vent their opinions. This newspaper will attempt to air them in a responsible manner, while making it absolutely clear where our sympathies lie.

On the Record is produced for the NGO Committee on UNICEF, a grouping of 125 NGOs from all over the world. They are richly diverse, but they are also united by a conviction that children need more protection -- and that this is the responsibility of governments. This is the essence of the 'rights based approach' to child development.

It must be said that the process of drafting a UN document can be frustrating and even distasteful. How can we take a process seriously which spends so much time nitpicking over words?

This is precisely the point. When they are pouring over the text with bleary eyes, delegates to this PrepCom need to remind themselves that they are drafting a document which will influence the lives of their own children and grandchildren. Every word counts.

The Outcome document will be endorsed by heads of state at the Special Session in September. It will then become a key instrument of international policy on children -- for better or for worse. Hopefully governments will use it responsibly. But some will certainly exploit any omissions. Twenty years from now, street children in Guatemala City or child soldiers in Africa could owe their lives to this piece of paper.

This is a measure of the awesome responsibility facing delegates to the PrepCom. It also explains why so many NGOs are worried.

NGOs have doubts about UNICEF's ability to resist pressure. They are also worried that UNICEF is approaching the Special Session as an intellectual exercise - as an attempt to satisfy all sides of this debate. They feel that UNICEF's historic mission is to protect children and that the Outcome document should come from UNICEF's heart as well as its pen. Under no circumstances should UNICEF defer to the views of governments that have positioned themselves outside the mainstream.

NGOs are worried that this PrepCom -- and the Special Session -- could undermine the progress that has been made since the World Summit on Children in 1990. The last ten years have seen consensus emerging around a whole range of issues: the special needs of girls; the reproductive health needs of women; the importance of universal primary education; the participation of

children. These achievements need to be strengthened, and the Special Session could provide a catalyst. It must not create a parallel agenda that undermines and weakens this progress.

All this explains why NGOs are particularly worried about the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Convention is not -- as the United States would have us believe -- a wish list of goals. It is a litmus test of governments' commitment towards children and a universal statement.

The United States is one of only two governments that has yet to ratify the Convention. It is regrettable for Americans that their government chooses to position itself outside the mainstream of world opinion, but it cannot be allowed to subvert and divert the will of the majority.

On this there can be no surrender.

Cautious Optimism Among Rights Advocates Over New Revised Text by On the Record Staff

Child rights activists have been heartened by several changes in the key PrepCom document that call for greater legal protection for several important categories of vulnerable children and appear to reflect more support for the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The changes appear in the latest text of 'A World Fit For Children,' also known as the 'Outcome document,' which is being drafted by the Bureau of the PrepCom. The Bureau comprises the governments of Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jamaica and Mali. UNICEF is serving as the drafting secretariat.

The new text was issued Thursday to governments and has been made available to 'On the Record.' So far, the first 39 paragraphs have been revised. The remaining paragraphs are expected to be ready by Monday.

This is the third revision of the Outcome document since it was first presented -- and very widely criticized -- at the PrepCom in January. The new text is based on informal discussions (also known as 'Intersessionals') that took place ten days ago in New York.

After a first reading of the latest draft, some child rights advocates expressed cautious optimism at what they saw as several 'positive' changes. They are particularly relieved that the Bureau has not totally yielded to pressure from the United States, which has launched a major diplomatic effort to dilute all references to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Many advocates feel that the text is still unacceptably lukewarm in its references to the Convention. (See the article on pages 4 and 5 of this issue.) But they are also heartened that paragraph 28 of the latest draft describes the Convention as the 'best normative framework for all our actions (on children).'

Paragraph 28 also calls for the development of 'monitoring and evaluation systems at the national level, to assess the impact of our actions in promoting the well-being of children.' Such systems could strengthen and improve the implementation of the Convention -- a critical goal for advocates at the Special Session.

The new revision also reinserts a call for 'free and compulsory' primary education in the declaratory portion of the Outcome document. Such a call would be sharply at odds with most current aid practice, which requires even the poorest parents to pay school fees and so serves as a barrier to universal education.

The new draft will also hearten many NGOs by its critical description of globalization. It calls for 'an open, equitable, rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory multilateral trading and financial system.'

Another important addition in the new revised text strengthens the language on the participation of children. This has been another battleground between child advocates and conservative critics of the child rights agenda, who feel that participation undermines the family. The new language calls on governments to 'ensure their (children's) participation.'

One entirely new paragraph (#20) reinserts a call to end discrimination against 'indigenous children, children of racial, religious and ethnic minorities and children of displaced families that are disproportionately disadvantaged in many countries due to discrimination.'

This addition is particularly heartening because NGOs lobbied hard for it with governments at the recent Intersessionals. 'This shows that lobbying can have an effect,' said one advocate.

All of these changes are edging the draft outcome towards a stronger and more detailed statement of principle in support of greater legal protection for children. But while they are modestly pleased by these particular changes, child rights advocates are also gearing up for a battle over other parts of their agenda which appear to have lost out in the current draft. There is particular concern that the current text does not prohibit the death penalty for crimes committed before the age of 18, or the corporal punishment of children.

Child Convention Provides 'Unique Foundation,' Say NGOs by Adam Frankel

The principles of the Convention on the 1989 Rights of the Child (CRC) and the rich experience gained from implementing it provide a uniquely strong foundation for the Special Session on Children, according to a position paper by child rights advocates.

The paper was issued on April 30 by the Child Rights Caucus, which brings together over 300 national and international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The Caucus is insisting that the forthcoming Special Session builds on the principles and standards of the CRC.

The Caucus has also drafted an alternative text for the PrepCom, in which the Convention is described as 'the most universally embraced human rights instrument in history.'

'We're stressing that the Plan of Action and the Outcome document should be seen as part of a larger implementation plan of the Convention on the Rights of the Child' and not as an alternative to the Convention, said Jo Becker of the Caucus.

While there are important differences among the views of NGOs attending this PrepCom, there is also wide agreement among them that the Outcome document should lead to real progress.

'Many NGOs want to see that this document goes further than the [1990] World Summit on Children and establishes concrete actions that can be measured in the future,' said Mary Diaz, co-chair of the Steering Committee of the NGO Committee on UNICEF. Many of the Committee's member organizations are also in the Child Rights Caucus.

'We want to see that it doesn't just reiterate the goals of the World Summit [on Children] or contain commitments that governments can wiggle out of,' said Diaz.

The same point was emphasized by Jackie Shapiro, who is co-chair of the NGO Committee's working group on girls. 'Countries can give lip service to anything,' said Shapiro. 'But if they don't put their money where their mouths are, it's not going to work.'

Ms. Shapiro said that the Outcome document must also highlight the special needs of girl children. She complained that the latest draft refers to issues like female genital mutilation and arranged marriages as if they affect all children instead of just girls.

Among other proposals offered by NGOs are: increased access to sexual and reproductive health information and services; free quality education for all children, a 'gender audit' to ensure that education is unbiased; protections to ensure that child survivors of violence, exploitation and trafficking are not criminalized; and a prohibition on the death penalty for crimes committed before age eighteen.

In spite of their common position on child rights, NGOs could find it difficult setting priorities, according to Becker. She acknowledged that the Child Rights Caucus has been criticized for bringing too many proposals to the table.

NGOs have also found it difficult to get consistent and reliable information about the drafting process. They were denied access to the recent Intersessional meetings where the latest draft of the Outcome Document was discussed between governments and the Bureau of the Preparatory Committee.

Despite these challenges, NGOs are clearly having an impact. The so-called Rio Group of governments (from Latin America and the Caribbean), the European Union, Canada and Switzerland have already embraced and advanced some of the language advocated by the Child Rights Caucus.

2.5 Million Pledges For Global Movement
by Jeremy Weissman

The Global Movement for Children has received over 2.5 million online pledges of support since it was launched on April 26 by UNICEF and five prominent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Several leading members of the Movement told *On the Record* that they were heartened by the support for the Movement, although they also admitted that it might be difficult to reach 100 million pledges by the time of the Special Session in September, as UNICEF hopes.

The Global Movement was formed in May 2000 by UNICEF, World Vision International, PLAN, Save the Children, Netaid.org and the Bangladesh Rural Action Committee (BRAC). Its first major initiative is a global drive to win pledges for Say Yes for Children -- a rallying call which sets out the ten key goals of the Global Movement.

Launched worldwide on April 26, 2001, the 'Say Yes' campaign asks respondents to pledge support for the GMC's Rallying Call and identify three of the ten principles that they consider most important in their region of the world. Most of the pledges are arriving at the website of Netaid.org, which is serving as the main online convenor for the Global Movement.

According to the website, the exploitation of children is singled out as the main priority of 14% of the online pledges followed by education (13.4%) and poverty (12.6%). The Global Movement is aimed at drawing civil society into a worldwide campaign for children in the run up to the Special Session, and it is seen as one of the most ambitious initiatives ever launched by UNICEF and its NGO partners.

There was some skepticism when the Movement was first launched that it would develop into a top-down campaign by large organizations, and that it would be too dependent on information technology. Although hundreds of millions of people have access to the Internet they account for less than 10% of the world's population and live in the most developed countries.

But while computers offer the quickest and easiest way of pledging, leaders of the Global Movement recognize that old-fashioned paper pledging is vital for the Movement's success at the grassroots.

In Guatemala, frontline staff of PLAN International have introduced the campaign on the community level, in particular through children's schools, according to Mohan Thazhathu, PLAN's U.N. representative and regional director for the Caribbean and Latin America.

Thazhathu told *On the Record* that some Guatemalan schoolchildren are so dissatisfied with the 10 principles that they have even proposed adding more of their own principles. 'The ten points are not limitations,' Thazhathu said. 'The platform is an opportunity for Debate. One eight-year-old wrote down that 'we should be listened to because children think better,' which is quite a remarkable response.'

Movement leaders are also addressing another concern - that the Global Movement will fizzle out after the Special session, when the international spotlight has moved on. 'We still don't have an answer to that question,' said Dan Seymour, who heads the New York office of Save the

Children International. 'Once people have said 'yes,' what do you do to challenge them to act on that?'

In response, the Movement's organizers are looking to the environmental movement, which took root worldwide during the 1970s. The idea, according to Seymour, is that if people can be persuaded to endorse a set of principles, they will be willing to modify their behavior.

Don't Forget Adolescents, Warn Latin American Governments by Gabrielle Eng

An influential lobbying group of 18 Latin American governments has warned the PrepCom not to ignore the sexual and reproductive needs of adolescents in the Outcome document.

The governments, known as the Rio Group, are concerned that the latest draft pays too little attention to adolescents and ignores the conclusions of several international agreements and conferences.

'The bottom line is that we can't turn back the international agreements drafted by consensus over the last decade. We cannot lower the standards already set,' said Loreto Leyton, First Secretary of the Chilean Mission, spokesperson of the Rio Group.

Ms. Leyton made special reference to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, as well as subsequent follow-up meetings.

These agreements made a commitment to improve and promote the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents. They specifically called for information, education and health services to be provided to adolescents to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

The Rio position has been criticized by several governments, including the US, Holy See, and a bloc of mainly North African governments that are known as Some Developing Countries (SDCs).

The US argues that too great a focus on adolescents detracts from the larger challenge of protecting infants who need proper nutrition, drinking water and sanitation. The SDCs agree as they see child needs in terms of underdevelopment. But they also feel that parents should have final say over the sexual and reproductive practices of their children.

The Rio group could not disagree more, and it has presented its own draft of the Outcome document, which it has made available to On the Record. Ms. Leyton pointed out that this draft contains language that was agreed long ago by the Beijing and Cairo conferences and should be automatically accepted by the PrepCom. The rights of children and parents complement each other and coexist in these texts.

The Rio governments have been lobbying hard for their position, and they are coming under attack for threatening consensus at the PrepCom. Ms. Leyton expressed surprise and

disappointment that they had not had more support from governments like Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the European Union, which had shared their views on adolescents.

Latin America has already achieved many of the targets adopted at the 1990 World Summit for Children. As a result, said Ms. Leyton, they feel confident about moving 'other tough issues, such as education, the rights of adolescents, teen pregnancy, juvenile justice, drugs, and rehabilitation issues.'

Profile: The 16-Year Old Peace-Maker by Rachel Watson

Children are often the first to suffer in war, but they also have their own unique way of making peace. Irakli Sabekia became a refugee in Georgia at the age of eight. Today, at the age of sixteen, he runs a school which helps young victims recover from conflict. Earlier this week he received an award from the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children in New York.

When he's not strumming punk anthems on his acoustic guitar, sixteen-year-old Irakli Sabekia leads conflict resolution classes for youngsters affected by war. A confident and rather serious young man, Irakli advocates for an end to the conflict in his native Georgia, a small state straddling the Caucasian mountains whose recent history has been plagued by violent internal upheaval.

'I was so young, I didn't understand what was happening,' he said, recalling his childhood during the war. 'Thank God I didn't lose anyone. I can be a peacemaker.'

Irakli grew up in the western province of Abkhazia, where his father worked as a doctor in the regional capital. When Georgia proclaimed independence from the dying Soviet empire in 1991, Abkhazia was quick to follow with its own demand to secede. A war for independence broke out, and like other ethnic Georgians living in the province, Irakli and his family were forced to leave their homes and flee. He was eight years old.

'They started bombing the city and we had to go to the basement and hide. It was very dangerous,' he said. 'My mother took me and my brother to my grandparents in Georgia but my father stayed there to take wounded people to hospital. We didn't know where he was. My mother just cried all the time.'

Eventually Irakli's father was able to leave Abkhazia, taking the last flight out. The whole family moved to the capital city, Tbilisi, where they lived in a cold and damp school building with six other displaced families. Irakli continued to study hard, despite the harsh living conditions, inspired by his father, who was by this time working twenty-four hours a day at the emergency room at the local hospital. He speaks of both parents with great respect, clearly inspired by their commitment to justice and human rights.

'Before the war, whenever I heard people speaking Abkhazian I asked my mother, 'what language are they speaking? Why don't they speak Georgian?' And my mother replied, 'they are the citizens of our town, they have the same rights as us, they just speak a different language.'

A committed student with good English and Russian, Irakli was chosen to take part in a youth leadership forum in the United States. He'd taken part in conflict resolution classes with other Georgian teenagers, but this was the first time he would come face to face with Abkhazian youngsters from the other side of the conflict. When asked about his first interaction with an Abkhazian teen, he stood up from his chair and began to act out the scene.

'There was a park, I was standing by the stairs,' he recalled, gesturing to an imaginary staircase. 'I walked up the stairs and I saw some feet and then I saw someone's face and he said 'Hello, I am Said,' in Russian, and I said, 'Hi, I'm Irakli.'

As he told this story, Irakli held out his hand as if to shake hands with an old friend.

But in the end, their relationship was far from easy. The conflict had left Said with deep personal scars.

'He lost his father during the war,' Irakli said. 'A child who has lost his father, it's difficult to make any progress. This was a mistake of the program. They brought children who had lost fathers and brothers and put them with those of us who are peacemakers. If I had lost someone it would have been difficult to communicate with the Abkhazians.'

'But I got some experience about our relationships with the Abkhazians and how they feel about us,' he continued.

Fortified by his experience in the States, Irakli returned to Georgia determined to pass on his newly-acquired skills and knowledge.

He proposed setting up a weekend school for children displaced by the war and was given a small grant for books and materials to teach conflict resolution, English, Math and other subjects. The five teachers at his school are all under 19 years old. Irakli takes a group of ten-to-thirteen-year-olds and uses role-play and discussion to explore relationships. They talk about conflict in its broadest sense, from interactions with family and friends to the meaning of war and specifics about the conflict in Abkhazia.

Earlier this week, Irakli Sabekia came to New York to be honored by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children for his commitment to education in times of crisis. As he accepted the 20001 Voices of Courage Award he explained that small projects like his can truly make a difference to the lives of refugees and displaced people.

'In Georgia we say that if you want to light one thousand candles you have to light the first one,' he told the audience. 'It means that if you want to do something you have to start it! So when you light the first candle it will share its light and the other candles will build on it.'

Protecting Children in War - What the NGOs Say

The alternative NGO Outcome text calls for strong measures to prevent children from getting drawn into conflict, and for protecting young victims of war. An updated version of the NGO text will be released next week.

Strengthen the protection of children affected by armed conflict and foreign occupation, including through the systematic monitoring of violations of their rights;

Ensure that issues pertaining to the rights and protection of children are fully reflected in the agendas of peace processes and in ensuing peace agreements, and are incorporated into United Nations peace operations;

End the use of child soldiers and ensure that children do not take part in hostilities by 2005, demobilize all children in armed forces or groups, ensure their rehabilitation and reintegration into society, and develop effective measures to address the political, social and economic factors that facilitate the exploitation of children as soldiers;

Curb the illicit flow of small arms and eliminate threats posed by landmines, unexploded ordnance and other war matériel that victimize children;

Impose targeted sanctions against parties who violate international standards protecting children in armed conflict, and impose targeted bans on exports such as national resources from war-affected areas that directly benefit parties to armed conflict who have targeted children;

Exclude war crimes against children from amnesty provisions and legislation, and include child protection provisions in the statutes and rules of war crimes tribunals, court and post-conflict truth-seeking mechanisms;

Provide training for all military and peacekeeping personnel in the rights and protection of children;

Establish early-warning systems for conflict-prone situations to report threats to the security and rights of children, track the price and availability of small arms, pay specific attention to the security of girls; and report on the scale and method of recruitment;

Protect refugee children, unaccompanied children seeking asylum and internally displaced children, who are particularly exposed to risks in connection with armed conflict; ensure their rights to education, health and safety, including special measures to protect them from sexual and labour exploitation and recruitment by government and other forces, and pay particular attention to programs for voluntary repatriation and, wherever possible, local integration and resettlement, to give priority to family tracing and reunification;

Ensure humanitarian programs safe and unhindered access to children affected by armed conflict, and give particular emphasis to education and family reunification;

Assess and monitor the impact of sanctions on children, and ensure humanitarian exemptions that are child-focused and formulated with clear guidelines for their application, in order to address possible adverse effects of the sanctions and ensure that children's rights under humanitarian law are respected;

Develop specific strategies to address the situation of girls in armed conflict, including their use in armed conflict and sexual exploitation, with the accompanying risks of HIV/AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancies, and child care.