



Reaching the heights for the rights of the child

Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2016-2021

High-Level Launching Conference

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Statements

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President

Malta

Your Excellency, Mr Rosen Plevneliev, President of Bulgaria
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Ms Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, Secretary General, Council of Europe
Mr Nils Muiznieks, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights
Excellencies
Distinguished guests
Friends

I am honoured to join you here today, to speak about a subject so close to my heart and so central to the work I do as President of Malta. Striving for the dignity and participation of children is vital if we are to achieve a peaceful transformation of our world, and the realisation of human wellbeing for children across Europe, and for future generations.

Therefore, let me begin by underlining my strong commitment to securing the full rights of every child. By dedicating ourselves to reinforced cooperation, we can ensure that every child is respected as an active member of society.

The Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child offers us an opportunity to reaffirm the potential of every child. It presents an opportunity for us to acknowledge the critical importance of a rights-based approach, if we are to effect sustainable change.



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It also opens a forum for deep discussion about the underlying nuances of that approach. We must not be afraid to admit criticisms of our rights-based paradigm, and to accept challenging perspectives that have the potential to strengthen us, and further guide our journey.

This strategy, which shall be underway between 2016 and 2021, offers a space in which academics and practitioners may develop new interpretations of child rights, accompanied by a concurrent commitment to reassess our political, cultural, and social presuppositions.

We must embrace opportunities for learning from communities that have not, as yet, enjoyed the fullness of their rightful participation in processes of policy making and legislation. As Europe grows, and continues to reflect a plurality of identities, so too must our positioning on issues of child rights grow and evolve.

We must never allow a single domineering narrative to control our discourse, or to overshadow the sensitive implementation of this strategy for the benefit of diverse children and communities throughout our nations. Let this conference help us to identify how all actors in Council of Europe member states may work together, in a spirit of sharing and of openness to change.

Let us share, through this Strategy, the key messages of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, by highlighting priority areas and opening new avenues for discussion. We should take pride in the fact that the CRC is the most widely ratified human rights instrument in the world. However, I appeal to all countries to ensure that the CRC is truly, and effectively, incorporated in domestic legislation.

The CRC reminds us of the need for additional guarantees, to make sure that children are able to access the human rights that are possessed by everyone. Of these, one of our strongest messages must be the need to end all instances of discrimination against children. An example of this is evidenced by my efforts to respond to missing and exploited children, and to halt any detention of child asylum seekers with this last initiative brought into effect by my government.

Alongside other factors, including poverty and violent conflict, discrimination is a leading cause for the marginalisation of certain children within society. Discrimination increases their vulnerability to rights violations, and cuts a child off from the hard-won heritage of the CRC.

And here I would like to pose an important question: How can our implementation of this Strategy nurture resilient communities and children, in the face of such concerns?

We must ensure that the implementation of this Strategy is carried out in an intersectional and systemic awareness of the struggles faced by children. If we are to credibly address discrimination and vulnerability, then our conversations and our actions must turn to the issue of justice.

Access to justice is not simply a human right — it is the pathway through which all other human rights are achieved and within which they flourish. For children's rights to be more than a promise, we must promote the ways in which those rights are enforced.

Children must be able to understand, to use, and, above all, to trust the legal systems that protect and facilitate their human rights. A child must know that the process itself is accountable, effective, and transparent — that it is worthy of the trust of a child, and capable of meeting that child's needs.

Children are as aware as adults of the abuses of power that have become an all too frequent part of our daily reality. And yet the importance of access to justice, especially regarding the rights of

the child, continues to be neglected.

If we are to ensure that this access becomes a reality, then it must engage all levels of society. It must cause a profound change in the relationships between children and the legal system itself. Governments are not alone in having a role to play; it is also courts and civil society, the media, parents, and other legal representatives.

We must move beyond an understanding of childhood as a transitory phase leading to adulthood. Rather, we must view it as a time in our lives that carries its own inner meaning, vital to the wellbeing of the child and with implications for the future of society as a whole. The need for effective access to justice, in safeguarding this crucial time in a human life, is clear.

My Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society works to achieve sustainable and effective initiatives in these areas, across the Maltese Islands. It has implemented an ethos of participatory and respectful engagement with children, developing a unique approach to nurturing, educating, and inspiring children through projects that have been strengthened by the work and the support of the Council of Europe.

One such project, entitled 'The President's Secret Garden,' has created a community of learning that prioritises critical reflection. It combines an awareness of environmental sustainability and education for peace, within a pedagogy rooted in relationship-building.

The project toolkit, produced after the first edition of the Secret Garden, aims to share good practice and stimulate discussions with educators and practitioners across Europe.

These practical engagements with children are supported by the academic research carried out by my Foundation. Following the success of the Foundation's 2015 Child Wellbeing Conference, on the topic of bullying, this year's conference shall focus on access to justice for vulnerable children. I invite you all to join us in Malta, and to share your perspectives.

A key element of this Child Wellbeing Conference, and in all the work with children carried out by my Foundation, is our responsibility to actively listen and respond to the child's perspective. This child-participation approach was the methodology used to draft a new child protection act based on children's experiences and perspectives. We are eager for the conference to explore the effectiveness of our laws and our conventions, when faced with the experiences of children.

I am confident that I speak with the Council of Europe when I say that our efforts must always be directed towards the empowerment of children, in the true spirit of the CRC.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Bulgarian State Agency for Child Protection, and Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, for hosting this event. The participation of so many of us, and our mutual commitment to the implementation of this Strategy, is greatly reassuring.

We still face many challenges. We must be bold, to secure the full participation of all children in society, and ensure that access to justice is a reality, especially the most vulnerable. We must take seriously the experiences of every child, no matter their gender, ethnicity, cultural background, or socio-economic status.

It is because, and not in spite, of our differences that we shall create a vision of children's rights that can withstand the uncertainty of our present world. And ultimately, it is by striving for the wellbeing of the child that we shall affirm the fundamental dignity of all humanity.

Thank you.