

## BEYOND THE HORIZON: A NEW ERA FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

*High-level Launching Conference for the new Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027)  
co-organised by the Council of Europe and the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers*

### Thematic Session II(B) Understanding the challenges faced by children as defenders of human rights

8 April 2022

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Thank you for the opportunity to engage in this deep dive conversation.

On behalf of Child Rights Connect – a global network of child rights organisations active in 184 countries, including many members across Europe, that aspire to realise the rights of all children in all places – I congratulate the Council of Europe on its new Strategy for the Rights of the Child and I express our commitment to its objectives and to ongoing strategic partnership.

At the core of the work of Child Rights Connect is our commitment to advance and facilitate child participation and the protection and empowerment of child human rights defenders (CHRDs). We have since 2017 led global awareness-raising for the recognition of children as human rights defenders. In collaboration with fellow speakers on this panel (Konstantinos, then as part of our Children's Advisory Team; and Michel Forst, as then UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders) we convinced the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to dedicate its 2018 Day of General Discussion to the situation of children as human rights defenders.

Building on the various insights gained from speaking directly with the 3,700 children at that ground-breaking event, we worked with children and experts from around the world to develop an **Implementation Guide on the Rights of Child Human Rights Defenders**. Published in 2020, the Implementation Guide analyses the bespoke provisions for children in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other relevant instruments, alongside the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. It draws out how these instruments can jointly advance national laws, policies and practices that are appropriate and effective for children, particularly in relation to child human rights defenders' right to be heard and to exercise their civil and political rights.

This work, and its subsequent implementation at the national level with our members and partners, including in Moldova, has highlighted and taught us several things. Amongst those, I highlight four things:

1. CHRDs face critical and distinct obstacles, the most fundamental of which stems from the widespread lack of recognition of their existence and of understanding their distinctive role, status and rights. This key challenge is grounded in "adultism"; the belief that adults are inherently more valuable than children and that, as such, they are entitled to act in place of children without agreement or in ways that interfere with their capacity to exercise agency over

their lives. **Lesson 1 then, is that we must recognise children as human rights defenders.** Without this, we cannot meaningfully understand and respond to the distinct challenges and opportunities that children may encounter, nor the distinct contexts in which they exercise their rights. Without this, their rights will continue to be missed, overlooked and violated by adults.

2. **Secondly, we observe that world is experiencing an unprecedented mobilization of children acting to defend theirs and others human rights.** Children are increasingly acting as human rights defenders to realize human rights and advance social justice for all, speaking up on various issues; from the environment and climate change to racial discrimination, from violence, including online, to alternative care and sexual education, the covid-19 pandemic, through engaging in online and offline awareness-raising campaigns, protests, and other activities from the local to global scale. From Children's Parliaments to Child Ombuds offices, from civil society organisations to child-led initiatives and groups, from National Human Rights Institutions to local governments, children are using existing spaces and creating new spaces, with adults and also independently, to act as human rights defenders. In all these spaces, children are increasingly telling adults that they have no other option but to take up and create spaces to speak out, because adults are failing to act. They tell us that adults are not listening to them and do not believe what they say, yet they understand that their insights, views and experiences as children are critical if we are to advance positive change for society today and for future generations. While there is still a long way to go, this momentum is building and there is a growing movement of adults that are recognizing and supporting CHRDs.
3. We must – as a third observation – also recognise that, alongside this growing and important role, **there are risks.** We have seen action by CHRDs result in attacks against child protesters in Thailand, children acting to promote peace in Russia, or the killing and threats against indigenous child human rights defenders in Colombia. Risks are also being experienced through children's use of the digital environment in their work as defenders, resulting in challenges of access and safety when using the online space. It is therefore crucial to ensure that the participation of child human rights defenders is inclusive, empowering and sustained; and that the spaces for this are safe. Safe for children to access and for them to voice their views and perspectives, opinions, experiences and recommendations. Without that, we cannot listen, nor can we act.
4. Against that background, **Lesson 4 is that we must all adopt measures to ensure safe, inclusive, empowering and sustained child engagement in the work of CHRDs.** Reflecting on our approaches in this regard, we recommend the following:
  - 1) Use our child-friendly **Implementation Guide on the Rights of CHRDs** to raise awareness, understanding and recognition amongst children (and adults too!);
  - 2) Review and implement the key recommendations in our **Implementation Guide** which sets out clear ways and methods for advancing the rights of CHRDs using a rights-based approach;
  - 3) Share our CHRD webpage and learning space for children (<https://chrds.childrightsconnect.org/>) so that children globally can take online modules to learn more about their rights as defenders and how to access UN human rights mechanisms;

- 4) Use the terminology of CHRDS and ensure that child participation is approached and undertaken as a broad spectrum of rights beyond the right to be heard (Article 12 of the UNCRC) and including children's civil and political rights;
- 5) Work broadly with partners at various levels to learn more about the activities of CHRDS and the ways we can promote and support their actions, including children in more vulnerable situations such as children on the move, children in street situations, Roma children and children with disabilities; and
- 6) Promote access to justice for child victims of human rights violations, particularly as a result of children's action as human rights defenders, such as through advocating for the use and ratification of the UNCRC's Optional Protocol on a Communications Procedure.

With that, I would like to end with a quote from our Children's Advisory Team child advisors, which is included in the child-friendly CHRD Guide:

*"Remember that today's human rights violations are the cause of tomorrow's conflicts. Let's work together to reach more parts of the world and make sure every child human rights defender enjoys their rights."*

I look forward to reflecting further on these and other points in the discussion ahead.