

**What is your experience as a young person acting as a human rights defender?**

My experience has mainly been positive, because I count myself as someone who has been privileged to come from a more supportive environment, in which human right defenders do not face as many challenges as in other parts of the world. There were many people during my time starting from teens4greece, to coming here that I felt that truly believed the cause and were eager to hear what young people and children had to say.

**- What has been inspiring about your past experiences in this field and what have been the main challenges?**

The universality of human rights is our biggest strength and the passion of change. It is a very powerful and beautiful image to see people from very different backgrounds coming together for common human causes that affect everyone, and it is in fact very indicative that we don't really differ that much from each other. I think there is nothing more inspiring than stories and narratives, and that is something I feel we lack today. Look at our news for example what is happening in Ukraine, or in other parts of the world we get fed with all these graphic images of people suffering, but we never learn their stories, who they are. And that is the greatest strength that should be pursued more narratives, stories because statistics can not do it that easily, we need the people behind the numbers. This also entails a risk as well and that is the issue of representation how can I claim to represent the young people of Greece for instance. How can I know what a refugee child is going through, how that child sees the world? So that is the key challenge to me, creating participation that is inclusive, transparent and more humane but also effective. Child and youth participation must be effective and not just a "decoration". Young people must have a role in all forms of decision making from education to the economy.

**- What would you recommend to other young people who would like to commit to becoming advocates for their own rights / the rights of others?**

I think what is particularly crucial is to find something you are really interested in for instance a lot of young people are really passionate for climate change. Then conduct research on that area to find out what is wrong always using credible sources, which can be a daunting act especially in times of crises. We are also quite lucky because we live in the digital age and that means that have access to a plethora of information and a platform that can be very powerful in terms of campaigning and raising awareness. Equally though, all this exposure has made us less sensitive, we are getting used to violence, poverty, and inequalities due to the constant exposure which is very important if done in the correct way. The attention span of most individuals is getting smaller and smaller and that means that news, conflicts, issues get forgotten quickly and easily. But we should not be afraid to use social media and generally the digital environment because it is an extremely powerful tool that can inspire, connect and raise awareness at a transnational level. The last piece of advice that I

would like to give is that we should leave our bias behind, we including myself as well often blame decision makers or generally adults and we rule off any possibility of working together. Child participation however is not a splash but rather a process that involves young people with adults at its core.

**- What do you expect of legal and political decision-makers to make children's voices better heard and ensure that they can act safely as human rights defenders?**

Better protection is needed certainly, human right defenders face prosecution in various countries in the world, from indigenous climate activist in the Latin America region to women's rights activists in other parts of the world protection measures should be put first and foremost. These protection measures however should crucially not "restrict" or filter the voice children but instead should act as a protection of their right to protest and freedom of speech. Often, children are great human right defenders due to their bravery but also honestly and that is something that must not be lost.

In addition, to make youth participation more effective I think it is crucial to establish bodies or committees consisted of young people that could be voted in order to formally also represent the youth. There are numerous examples of children's elected bodies in Europe and the expansion of these projects is the next step in establishing partnerships between the decision makers and young people. We must take a bottom-up approach that will include children as equal partners in a decision making process that is inclusive and effective.