

**Presentation made at the:
Council of Europe mid-term evaluation
of the Strategy for the Rights
of the Child (2016-2021)**

**High level conference
Strasbourg 13-14 November 2019**

On the 9th of October 2012, a young girl- Malala Yousafzai- was shot in the head on her way home from school as she campaigned for her right to an education. She was 17 at the time and has been a leading education activist since. She is a perfect demonstration of the power of children to change the world around them- but her story is also a warning of the dangers activists can face.

Children cannot stand as activists alone. From my experience in local democracy groups, it seems to me that there are three main ways child activists need help.

The first of these is that young people need a platform from which to speak, for example a youth council or forum. The power of children is their passion about the issues affecting them- but a platform should do more than just allow young people to be heard- it should allow young people to actually be listened to by those in power and have our thoughts considered in decisions.

Disabled young activists also need support. As someone with a visual impairment there is nothing more down-heartening than going to a local democracy event which speaks about how important inclusion is when you're not able to see the materials provided. We have seen the power of disabled activists through Greta Thunberg who has overcome many challenges, including her autism- to become perhaps the leading climate activist in the world. Inclusion and accessibility should be at the forefront of child activism.

Perhaps the greatest way for children to change their future is through politics. Yet in many countries the voting age is 18 so children cannot have a say over matters affecting them- and they've noticed. In a survey of 700 people conducted by a youth group I am involved with, not having a vote at 16 was selected as one of the top 20 issues young people faced- and If there were not so many more immediate problems, I'm sure even more young people would have prioritised the subject. This is a controversial topic, but many young people I have spoken to believe they should have the vote at 16 or earlier. In my country, at 16 you can smoke, get married or start a family, and at 17 learn to drive. These are huge responsibilities

where potentially fatal mistakes can be made, yet at these ages young people are not deemed responsible to vote.

If young people were given political classes at school or elsewhere- in an unbiased setting- and allowed to vote at a younger age, we would have a generation of passionate young people armed with the information they needed to vote- and we might see the power of children in politics and shaping their own future. The power of children is that they know their rights and lives better than anyone else, and yet they cannot have their opinions listened to.

When it comes to keeping child activists safe, I would briefly like to comment on the importance of social media. The power of children like Greta Thunberg is to be able to spread their activism across the world with a click of the button- however this opens up many dangers, and I'm not sure all adults appreciate the significance of this. Greta Thunberg has been mocked and attacked by many journalists and celebrities, and faced 100s of messages of hate mail on sites like instagram- and we need to keep child activists as safe as possible from this danger moving onward.

But what can adults learn from young people? In answer to this I would briefly like to talk about my home of Northern Ireland. for around 30 years we went through what could be described as a civil war between extremists from the two main communities there, and although there are still many tensions, young people have become leaders in breaking down boundaries. In the aforementioned Youth Survey, issues like flags, policing, bonfires and parades which were once major flash points between communities came last in importance in a question about reconciliation, while all of the top results were along the theme of cross-community cooperation. The power of children in Northern Ireland has been to move on and accept those from all religions and backgrounds, and leave the past conflicts and hatred in the past.

Malala Yousafazi, who I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, went on to become world famous as she campaigns for her right to an education, and, as i'm sure you all know, became the youngest person to win a Nobel peace prize. From Malala risking her life for

her right to an education to Greta Thunberg denying herself the right to education in protest of climate change, we have seen the incredible power of children to change the world around them- and there is much, much more to come.