

***Save the Children's submission for the OHCHR report on  
'Civil society space in multilateral institutions'***

**30 September 2017**

The involvement of a strong, diverse and independent civil society, including organizations and groups representing the most excluded and marginalized people, with multilateral institutions is essential to make the United Nation's (UN) 'we the people' a reality and to ensure people-centred development and the realization of human rights.

Children<sup>1</sup>, who constitutes more than 30% of the world's population, are important actors in civil society and must have a voice in the work of multilateral organizations at all levels.

Save the Children engages extensively with multilateral institutions at all levels to promote and monitor the realization of the rights of all children together with children. For example, through our offices in Addis Ababa, Brussels, Geneva and New York we engage with the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and the UN. Our regional offices in Africa, Asia, Middle East and Latin America and the Caribbean are involved with different regional organizations. Save the Children works in 120 countries where we often have relationships with multilateral institutions with national presence. Our work with and for children at local and national levels also inform our engagement with these institutions at regional and international levels.

This submission builds on experiences, good practices and lessons learnt identified by Save the Children through our long-standing involvement with different multilateral institutions, including our work to support children to have their voices heard with these institutions.

### **Civil society engagement**

Save the Children engages with multilateral institutions, and where relevant with their Member States, in a number of ways. We share evidence and learning from our programmes and research to influence agenda setting, meetings, negotiations, strategic documents and accountability processes across a range of issues of importance to children in developed, developing and humanitarian contexts. We follow-up on international and regional commitments and obligations at different levels and hold states, and where relevant multilateral institutions, to account for their obligations.

Save the Children provides input to the work of international and regional human rights bodies and mechanisms, most notably the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council and the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and use concluding observations, recommendations and outcomes from these mechanisms in national advocacy and dialogue. We engage with UN bodies, agencies, funds and programmes, including through inter-agency groups where civil society and UN actors come together around specific issues.

We take advantage of our presence at national, regional and international levels to ensure local to global linkages and that the work of multilateral institutions is informed by the views and experiences of the most excluded and marginalized people, including children. As part of this, we support children to participate in the work of these institutions in safe and meaningful ways (see section below).

Our engagement with multilateral institutions works best where formal opportunities – through written inputs and participation in meetings - are systematically provided to engage, where these opportunities are announced in a timely manner and where our input is taken into account. Timely access to relevant information and documents through online platforms are also a crucial pre-requisite. This also facilitates more meaningful engagement with and support to children to engage with multilateral institutions.

At the same time, we are concerned by trends over the last couple of years where civil society has less space to engage with some of these institutions, including the AU and the EU. While the AU has expanded access to

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<sup>1</sup> Children are defined as individuals below the age of 18 in accordance with the UNCRC.

technical and ministerial thematic meetings, access to AU Summits for civil society organizations has become increasingly restricted. The EU has sometimes a tendency to limit opportunities for consultations with civil society, notably in relation to migration policies.

Similarly, there is often a lack of formal spaces for civil society participation in high-level political fora such as the UN High-Level Political Forum and the UN General Assembly. The spaces offered for civil society participation are often limited to having several civil society statements read out at the end of meetings or to designated civil society focused discussions or side events, rather than including civil society inputs meaningfully as part of political discussions and negotiations by Member States. Lengthy accreditation processes also risk excluding local stakeholders that might not have the capacity to go through these processes without specific facilitation and guidance. Limited funding support for civil society participation further restricts the participation of local stakeholders.

To facilitate meaningful civil society engagement in their work, multilateral institutions should:

- Ensure that their work is transparent and inclusive with multi-stakeholder participation and interactive dialogue with civil society, including children and excluded groups. Civil society should have formal and predictable opportunities to participate in different processes in person, through virtual means and written inputs. To facilitate civil society involvement, accreditation processes must be transparent, non-politicized, straightforward and implemented without delay. Civil society organizations without accreditation should still have meaningful opportunities to participate in the work of these institutions.
- Make relevant documents available in different languages in a timely manner to ensure that civil society and other actors have sufficient time to prepare for their meaningful participation and input. The systematic web casting of meetings contributes to increased transparency and enables people living far from the headquarters of multilateral institutions to follow their work.
- Take proactive, concrete steps to ensure that the most excluded and marginalized groups of people can participate meaningfully in the work of multilateral organizations, including by addressing the financial, linguistic, logistical, technological or age barriers that prevent the participation of specific groups. This will also contribute to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledge to 'leave no one behind'.
- Create organizational cultures where the contributions and active involvement of civil society is seen as a necessary condition to effectively implement the different mandates of multilateral institutions.

## Children's right to engage with multilateral institutions

Children have a right to have their views heard, engage in civic action and participate in public decision-making and accountability processes in accordance with articles 12, 13, 15 and 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This right also applies in relation to the work of multilateral institutions.

Studies supported by Save the Children establishes that children want to participate in public processes and positively contribute to the development of their societies.<sup>2</sup>

### Children want to be involved in public decision-making and accountability

*'There should always be a space for children's voices to be heard.'*

Child from Africa

*'Stronger communication between those who make the decisions and those who 'get' the consequences of these decisions..'*

Child from Eastern Europe

*'It is impossible for them to invest in us if they do not ask us what to invest in! We know; they should ask.'*

Child from Latin America and the Caribbean

Children's participation is a core value of Save the Children and we have worked with children across regions for many years. The strengthening of meaningful participatory processes for all children is key to sustainable development and to meet international human rights obligations. Our experience also shows that involving

<sup>2</sup> Save the Children & the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University (2016), *Children Speak Out - Summary of research with children on their civil and political rights* and Centre for Children's Rights (2015), *Towards better investment in the rights of the child: the views of children*



children in public decision-making and accountability at local, national, regional and international levels plays an important role in ensuring realization of their other rights. Children bring new insights about their situation and provide creative solutions to difficult circumstances that can help improve development outcomes and design more accurate and relevant interventions. Involving children also helps them to understand democratic decision-making processes and builds their confidence and learning around human rights activism.

Children still face a number of challenges when engaging with multilateral institutions. Children identify adults themselves and their lack of respect for children and their right to engage in public processes at different levels as a key barrier to their meaningful participation. In a survey commissioned by Save the Children with 1,600 children from 60 countries only 62 per cent of children felt confident that adults would act on their recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

### **Children influence the UPR of Albania**

Save the Children and World Vision International supported children in Albania to put their recommendations on how to improve children's rights before the second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Albania in 2014. Children interviewed their peers and structured the findings and recommendations into a UPR submission. They conducted advocacy with embassies at national level and presented their recommendations to Permanent Missions to the UN in Geneva. All their recommendations were addressed in the UPR recommendations made to and accepted by Albania. Following the UPR session, the National Agency for Protection of Child Rights in Albania organized a hearing in the Parliament. The children involved in the UPR-process were invited to discuss the issues that they raised in the UPR and to give their recommendations on how to improve the child rights situation in Albania. As a result of this process, the space for children to express their views and recommendations in public processes has improved in Albania.

Many of the meetings, processes and negotiations organized by multilateral institutions also lack child-friendly platforms and spaces where children can engage with decision-makers in ways that work for them. Documents produced by these institutions are rarely available in languages and formats suitable for children. Without access to child-friendly information, children cannot express informed opinions and engage meaningfully in different processes. When child-friendly documents are available, they are often produced by civil society.

In addition, accreditation processes for children are often complex and lengthy. It is, for example, difficult to register children (particularly aged under 16) for a UN pass to access UN Headquarters in New York with special dispensation or a letter of support required. Additionally, Save the Children requires all children under the age of 18 to be accompanied by a chaperone at all times for their safety, support and where relevant to help with translation. On several occasions chaperone access has been restricted to key meetings and events by UN security teams in New York and children have been left to participate either alone or have had to be withdrawn by Save the Children from participating.

<sup>3</sup> Save the Children & the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University (2016), [\*Children Speak Out - Summary of research with children on their civil and political rights\*](#)

Increasingly, many multilateral institutions and Member States are investing in ‘youth engagement’. While this is a positive development, we must also keep a focus on children and the special provisions required to engage children.

### Children engaging with ASEAN

With support from Save the Children Philippines, Children Talk to Children - a coalition of children’s own organizations in the Philippines - has been participating in the ASEAN Children’s Forum (ACF). ACF was created by ASEAN to serve as a venue for children from across Member States to participate in ASEAN policy discussions, including to express their views on issues affecting children and other regional issues of interest to them. ACF takes place every two years prior to the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development. Regional platforms for children’s participation, such as the ACF, are important for children to influence the work of regional organizations. To strengthen these platforms and to help children participate more meaningfully, Children Talk to Children would like additional adult support to help them express their views in meetings with children from diverse backgrounds. They would like children not participating in local children’s groups and potentially representing more marginalized and excluded groups to join them and for children attending ACF to be supported to provide better feedback on the regional meeting and to share their experiences with their peers.

Through our support to children from across the world to engage with multilateral institutions, Save the Children has identified a number of good practices and lessons learnt that should be considered in ensuring children’s meaningful, inclusive and safe involvement with these institutions, including:

- Children need access to age-appropriate, gender-sensitive and timely information in a language and format they can understand. For example, child-friendly versions of international commitments and human rights standards, such as the SDGs<sup>4</sup> and the UNCRC<sup>5</sup>, are important for children’s meaningful engagement in their implementation.
- Child-friendly platforms and spaces need to be put in place to facilitate for children’s engagement – in-person or remotely - with multilateral institutions in a meaningful and safe way. To this end, multilateral institutions could increasingly use information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate more virtual engagement. During the 2016 UN General Assembly, for example, Save the Children facilitated a highly impactful intervention from an 11-year old Syrian girl in a refugee camp in Jordan through video web-link with the UN Secretary General. Children engaging with multilateral institutions should also be provided with feed-back on how their input has been taken forward.
- While ensuring the necessary security arrangements, accreditation processes for children need to be simplified and must allow a child to be accompanied by his/her adult chaperone/translator at all times.
- Necessary measures should be put in place to protect children before, during and after his/her engagement with multilateral institutions based on a risk assessment and with follow-up and monitoring mechanisms in place.
- Children need adults to be ready to listen to them and take their views and recommendations seriously. Leaders of multilateral institutions and their Member States at the highest levels need to speak out on the importance of children’s participation, address negative attitudes towards children and create organizational cultures where children are seen as valued contributors to the work of these institutions. Multilateral institutions could also put systems in place to train its staff and staff of its Member States on children’s rights, their right to participate in the work of these organisations and how to engage with children in a meaningful, safe and respectful way. To this end, multilateral institutions could also consider adopting specific standards on how to ensure children’s safe, meaningful and inclusive participation in their work. An example of these kind of standards is the UN Committee on the Rights

<sup>4</sup> Global Movement for Children of Latin America and Caribbean (2014), *The World We Want – A Young Person’s Guide to the Global Goals for Sustainable Development*

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF (2014), *If you are under 18 years old, you have these rights too, Convention on the Rights of the Child*

of the Child Working Methods for the Participation of Children in the Reporting Process of the Committee on the Rights of the Child<sup>6</sup>, which has been informed by the basic requirements for effective, ethical and meaningful implementation of the right of the child to be heard outlined in the UNCRC General Comment No. 12 (2009) on the right of the child to be heard.<sup>7</sup>

## Enabling national environment for civic action

Without an enabling environment for civic action and for adults and children to participate in public decision-making and accountability processes at national level, including the most marginalized and excluded people, it will be difficult for civil society to participate in the work of multilateral institutions in a meaningful and safe way.

Space for civic action is under threat in many countries. According to data from the CIVICUS Monitor almost one in ten people live in a country with closed civic space and over a third of people live in countries with repressed civic space<sup>8</sup> thereby violating international human rights obligations on freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and access to information and seriously hampering meaningful and safe civil society involvement with multilateral institutions.

To ensure that civil society, including children, can play its role within an enabling national environment:

- States should guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, access to information and public participation in law and practice. These rights should be in line with international human rights standards.
- States should also repeal laws and abandon practices that restrict:
  - Individuals to form and join civil society organizations.
  - Civil society organizations to fulfill their legal purposes without state interference.
  - Civil society organizations to seek and secure resources, including across borders.
- Multilateral institutions should lead by example in respect of civil society participation and promote, monitor and protect an enabling environment for civil society, including the full realization of the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and access to information, in their engagement with Member States. These efforts should extend to children and their rights to engage in civic action and public affairs.
- Relevant international and regional organizations providing ODA can also provide direct, predictable and long-term funding to civil society organizations, including organizations working explicitly to protect human and child rights and civic space.

<sup>6</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014), [\*Working Methods for the Participation of Children in the Reporting Process of the Committee on the Rights of the Child\*](#)

<sup>7</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [\*General Comment No. 12 \(2009\) on the right of the child to be heard\*](#)

<sup>8</sup> CIVICUS (April 2017), [\*People Power Under Attack – Findings from the CIVICUS monitor\*](#)

