


Child Rights in the Network of Generations

An appeal for a topical reading of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Lothar Krappmann and Kurt Lüscher

Many subjects, which are intensely discussed by the public, recently refer to children: Examples of far-reaching consequences are care and education in the early years complementing parental efforts and the all-day school. In these debates it would seem obvious to refer to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet such attention is paid reluctantly only, as this treaty is hardly known, or it is simply maintained that the treaty lopsidedly emphasizes the rights of children - according to the Convention young human beings up to the age of 18. However, a thorough reading of the Convention demonstrates that it constructs no antagonism between rights of the children and parents. On the contrary, it is based on the comprehensive and persevered conception that in reality "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society" (Art. 29) can be implemented in mutual dependence of the generations only. We intend to substantiate this thesis by an analysis of some of the pivotal provisions of the Convention.

1. Rights of Children - Rights of Parents

Just mentioning "rights of children" is often interpreted as an attack on the "rights of the adults". The fear of losing authority is additionally nurtured by the view that children should be invested with rights, which they were not entitled to until now. It is suspected that the entire legal framework would be changed by the recognition of rights of children: Existing legal status would be lost whereas new right holders encroach upon established legal relationships.

Thus, rights of children and rights of parents, rights of the young and rights of old become an opposition, a field of rivalry and conflict, even a "war of generations". The horrifying scenario depicts children who, for instance, impatiently answer back to their parents, who refuse to go to bed in time, who attend school only when their favourite subjects are scheduled and who insist on more pocket money. Is this the content of the agreement of the State parties to the Convention? No, obviously not at all. The conception of rights, which equally adhere to all human beings, young or old, and are not assigned by a law, does not refer to rights, which are awarded because of children's merits. The Convention incorporates rights, to which children are forever entitled by being human beings. Human rights treaties do not aim at the provision of added rights rather than at the awareness of children's human rights and their consideration in all laws, measures and actions, which affect children.

The Convention hence addresses what is the right of all human beings, including children, although respecting their level of development and their need for protection. For this reason the member states

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3. Or by mail: SAGW, Box 8160, CH-3001 Bern.)
responsibility and social participation, it opens up far-reaching and current perspectives. Apart from possible tensions between old and young the Convention is shaped by the interdependence of the generations and legally safeguards this interdependence.

3. Best interests of the child (Art. 3)

It is crucial to read the text accurately in order to avoid the impression that the treaty stipulates to give priority to the best interests of the child in all conflicts of interests including such conflicts among the generations. This would remove the best interests of the child from all negotiations about access and distribution; generational conflicts would be pre-decided in favour of children.

In fact the Convention designates some areas, where the best interests of the child have to be paramount. They include the separation of the child from maltreating or neglecting parents (art. 30), adoption (Art. 21) or the potential exclusion of parents in juvenile justice procedures (Art. 40, 2 b, ii)). In Art. 3, in which the Convention generally explains the right to consideration of the child's best interest, the Convention stipulates that the best interests of the child have to be a primary consideration. The Convention takes into account that other interests exist which also need primary consideration.

Only by acknowledging other interests of high importance it was possible to extend primary consideration of the child's best interests from areas, which are of existential relevance to the child such as separation from parents or adoption, to "all actions concerning children" (see para. 1 of Art. 3). For this reason the best interests of the child are not the, but only one of the issues of primary consideration.

This becomes evident, if community development, retirement funds, energy supply or CO₂ emissions are under debate. Mostly such problems are discussed from the perspective of other pressure groups or generations.

Often the term "best interest of the child" in the official UN text is used interchangeably with the term "wellbeing". Although the dictionary declares the meaning of both terms as identical, there is an important difference. The term "best interests" elucidates that children are subjects with interests, perspectives and objectives of their own. The Convention juxtaposes these interests alongside with the interests of other groups in society and consequently integrates children into the controversies in society and the succession of generations.

According to the Convention, the best interests of children have to be explicitly defined and respected in all actions concerning children. Thus, it is not enough to assure after decisions have been made that children were always in the mind of the decision makers. Rules of decision-making in legislative bodies, administration and children's institutions have to guarantee that children's best interests are actually debated. This way, the best interests of children receive recognition besides other interests, which have to be considered with priority as well.

In such processes it has to be transparent to which extent the best interests of children are incorporated into the outcome or are put back. The right of children stipulating that their interests have to be considered does not separate them from adults. On the contrary, the interdependence of the generations is strengthened. The Convention binds the generations together; finding best possible solutions with regard to children's wellbeing and best interests is seen as a shared learning process involving all generations.

4. Evolving capacities (Art. 5)

The relationship between the generations as conceived of by the Convention can be further elucidated by a formulation in Article 5 addressing age and maturity of the child. Both terms are often used to justify the exclusion of children from participation. Yet, such actions would have serious consequences, as children would be dependent on benevolence and at the same time at the mercy of adults' discretion.
It is not denied that children do not overview all conditions and circumstances and are lacking capacities and understanding necessary to examine the best interests in view of children’s development to be assessed, e.g. when due weight has to be given to a child’s view (Art. 12).

This stipulation again indicates the importance of close interdependent relationships between children and parents as well as other adults. The right and the obligation of parents to guide and direct their children is confirmed. Article 5, however, insists that guidance and directions have to be given in a manner, which takes account of the evolving capacities of the child. Parents and other adults, who want to convey values and orientations to the child, have to thoroughly scrutinize to what extent the capacities of the child have developed, which challenges for further development the child needs and which problems would overburden him or her.

The request to give guidance and simultaneously to consider the child’s evolving capacities, demands parents’ attention, intimate involvement with the child and orientation of guidance and directions to the best interests of the child, as also required by Article 5. In summary: The child needs a close interrelationship with all adults, who are near to the child on his/her way to adulthood. Relationships are indispensable in which human beings, as children as well as adults, pay attention to each other and can mutually rely on each other.

Two greatly discussed issues are not addressed by the Convention: Parent-child attachment, which is so essential for the child’s healthy development, and the call for limits, with which children have to be confronted. Attachment is a quality of relationships, which a treaty cannot oblige States parties to implement. Yet the Convention entitles children to the right that the family is assured support, counselling and adequate living conditions. Such provisions will favour close parent-child relationships.

Limits, which, according to some pedagogical views, children must experience, are no topic of the Convention. However it acknowledges evolving capacities, age and maturity. With respect to the Convention State parties define minimum ages for children’s activities and responsibilities such as criminal responsibility, employment or age of marriage. The observation that these age limits are defined differently, shows that cultural traditions influence such age definitions, but today have to be reconsidered in many societies in the light of the Convention and its provisions. The responsibilities and freedoms in family and everyday lives of children have to be permanently adapted to the evolving and freedoms in family and everyday lives of children have to be permanently adapted to the evolving capacities of children and, therefore, have to be constantly negotiated. If accorded responsibilities are disregarded the evolving capacities, the child is bereaved of challenges, which could push forward her/his development and should push forward development. Without challenges no development!

Rules, if not explained and mutually agreed upon, disconnect parents and children and deprive them of a task to be shared. With regard to intergenerational relationships, the rhetoric of limits is dangerous, to set a limit avoids searching for shared understanding and inhibits explanation. For this reason such behaviour harms relationships into a one-sided command structure of the older ones to the young instead of generating joint efforts to construct rules of living together.

5. Participation, the child’s rights to be heard (Art.12)

Above all the public is aware of children’s right to participation. This is correct and wrong at the same time. It is correct, as the right of the child to be heard is one of the principles of the Convention, which is relevant wherever rights of the child are implemented in practice. Protection, healthy life, development and promotion of children shall be realized together with children to the extent possible. It is wrong and causes misinterpretation, if children’s participation would be understood just as political involvement by means of election rights and voting.

Nothing about election rights and voting is mentioned in the Convention. Instead State parties to the Convention ensure to give due weight to the views which children have the right to freely express in all matters affecting them. Age and maturity of the child have to be taken into account. Although the concept of participation is not found in the Convention, it is a good term, however, depicting a practice, which has evolved on the base of the guarantee to give the child a voice. Who is entitled to the right to be heard, has to receive a response. Otherwise the child would not know that he or she was heard. The response may be followed by additional utterances. This stimulates communication, exchange and produces participation and sharing.

If participation is regarded in this way, participation in fact is a central message of the Convention. From early years on children have to be involved in shaping their relationship and social lives. Their views, more precisely: their perspectives (and one could add: their experiences) have to be considered. By whom? By those, with whom children share their lives: first, therefore, by their parents, caregivers, teachers, but also by all the others who influence children’s lives. Much more than the right to vote, which may be exercised without any consideration, the right to be heard including the due response opens the door for intense relationships between generations.

The enjoyment of the right to be heard needs conditions, which have to be created and guaranteed. It is the responsibility of adults to provide these conditions. The right has to be ensured not only with regard to individual cases, but generally. It has to be institutionalized in ways, which respect the particular life circumstances, in family, school, daycare and other facilities for younger children and adolescents, local communities and private initiatives.

School is a central field of joined cultivation of participation and increasing responsibility, as the school is full of everyday tasks and challenges, which ask for agreed solutions. Adults and children share learning, leisure and social life for many years in a stable framework, within which they should be given opportunities to plan, decide, experiment and reconsider results on the base of procedures which adults and children themselves have negotiated. School is a community with various forums: talk in the classroom, class council and representative bodies, which provide realistic experience with accepted and reflected responsibility. Since the Convention defines listening and response as the foundation of participation, but not “self-determination” of children, the Convention supports the aims of civic education in school, which has to develop the fundamentals of shared responsibility by debate and negotiation, controversy and agreement.

The second paragraph of the article is of particular relevance, in which the State parties to the Convention declare that they will ensure the right of the child or of her/his representative to be heard in all judicial and administrative proceedings, which affect the child.

The formation of just, protective and promoting life conditions for children requires a meaningful orientation, which is shared by the generations, old and young. This orientation cannot be established by one generation for the other, by the older generation for the younger. It can be produced by the participation of the younger generation only, as soon as they can voice their own perspective and views.

6. Mass media (Art. 13 and 17)

Realistically the Convention recognizes the high relevance of the media in children’s processes of growing up. It is stated that children’s right to freely express their views implies the right to free access to information. Consequently the Convention stipulates that children can use the opportunities for information and learning. The production and dissemination of books for children is explicitly demanded. At the same time, the necessity of guidelines is emphasized, which protect children “from information and material injurious to his or her well-being” (Art. 17).
Language Policies and Law in Education in Post-Soviet Belarus

Iryna Usalusk

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought to the fore claims of linguistic minorities which had been ignored a way too long. In almost all of the former Soviet republics language became an impetus to national revival and an important instrument in consolidating the newly independent states. At times excessively accentuated and overly politicized, the language issue demanded immediate reaction. It was not, therefore, surprising, that almost all of the former Soviet republics rejected to various degree the legal dogmas which had been created in the Soviet Union and moved towards the weakening of the bonds within the former USSR, the lowering of the status of the Russian language as a symbol of long-term oppression and, as a consequence, the strengthening of the position of the titular language. Belarus has somewhat stood aloof in the process. "The most de-nationalised of the non-Russian successor states," with its "language subjected to the greatest degree of russification" Belarus was reluctant to draw away from the Soviet Union and so far it has been "the least successful in shifting towards the titular language." This is despite the fact that Belarusians in the Republic of Belarus make up 81.2% of the population. The main minority groups, as recorded in the 1999 census, include Russians 1,142,000 (11.4%), Poles 396,000 (3.9%), Ukrainians 237,000 (2.4%) and Jews 28,000 (0.2%). Statistics also reveal that Russian, and not Belarusian, is the dominant language in Belarus, spoken normally at home by 63% of the population. Among other languages in Belarus, the most important are the neighboring ones - Polish, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian.

With Russian being the de facto main language, and Belarusian playing largely a symbolic function, the position of other languages spoken by minority groups residing within the territory of Belarus seems indeed precarious. The present paper seeks to identify the main tendencies in the development of language legislation in the area of education, which has traditionally been considered as determinant for the survival of the language, in Belarus. It investigates the place the Belarusian legislation in the field of education reserves for the language rights of the titular nation and those of national minorities.

The Development of Language Policies and Law in Education in Belarus since 1990

In order to understand the current debates surrounding the language issue in education in Belarus, it is instructive to consider the most important changes that occurred in Belarusian state language policies

References

1. PhD in law from the European University Institute
5. Reference is made to the data of the 1999 census, available in Russian at http://belstat.gov.by/house/ru/persp/main1.php. The data of the more recent 2009 census had not been made public at the time when the article was being written (September 2010)
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