

1. Introduction

I am very pleased to join you today. Sincere thanks to Professors Ton Liefaard and Ann Skelton for the invitation to participate in the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the Advanced LL.M. in International Children's Rights. Happy birthday!! These first years have been intense, exciting and extremely successful. Many more successes will surely follow in the years to come.

I find it truly inspiring to celebrate this special occasion with a thriving group of alumni present here today. You represent and indeed give voice to the excellence of this program. You bring sound knowledge, unique skills and experience, and extraordinary energy to mobilize support for the realization of children's rights and help to translate the child rights international normative framework into a living experience for children around the world.

As we know well, it is there, in small places, that human rights gain real meaning. Small places, so small that they cannot be seen on a map. Yet, they are the world of the individual child; the school the child attends, the neighborhood where the child grows up; the family environment the child calls home. Unless human rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.

2. Child rights movement

Dear friends, each time I join a child rights forum I feel deeply energized. We are privileged to belong to a vibrant global movement that has a lot to celebrate and has a lot more to achieve.

For many decades, children's rights were on the periphery of the debate. In fact, when the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted, there were voices wondering about the need for such a treaty and if it would bring any added value. Well, these doubts did not last long as the principles and provisions of the Convention quickly became a reference for nations around the world.

The truth is that human rights start with children's rights! And nowadays children's rights are central to the policy agenda. They permeate the international development agenda, are a priority in humanitarian action, an imperative for migration and refugee

questions, and, despite an often tense and divisive atmosphere, they are at the core of the agenda of the UN Security Council.

So much has happened over the past years: the enactment of strong laws, the reform of national Constitutions, the shaping of new policies and establishment of independent child rights institutions, the gathering of new data and the constant refinement of monitoring tools to assess progress, capture children's concerns and grant visibility to neglected areas; the strengthening of partnerships to reinforce children's protective environments; and a worldwide alliance with children and young people themselves, always resourceful, enthusiastic, and determined to achieve positive change.

This is a process that never stops! Indeed, human rights are working! In recent months, Lao PDR¹ became the first South East Asian country² to prohibit the physical punishment of children, including as a form of discipline, and to reinforce this measure with the establishment of hotlines and consultation centers to enable children to access counseling, medical treatment and legal support.

Scotland incorporated the Convention into its legal framework, making it directly enforceable and always mandatory: when laws are enacted, when policies and budgets are shaped, when data is gathered, when progress is monitored.³

Ukraine adopted a new Law on Preschool Education to overcome the war's devastating blow on early childhood development and to ensure an inclusive, equitable and quality system for young children in frontline and remote areas.⁴

And last June, Pakistan's Parliament set the minimum legal age of marriage at 18 for both girls and boys in the Islamabad Capital Territory, making it the country's second province with a gender-equal legal framework in this area.⁵

¹ Amendment on the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children, adopted in December 2023

² Thailand became the second country in the region to ban all forms of violence against children, through an amendment to the section 1567 of the Civil and Commercial Code – 24 March 2025

³ UNCRC Incorporation Scotland Act 2024

⁴ The new law entered into force on the first of January 2025

⁵ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/a-turning-point-in-pakistans-fight-to-end-child-marriage-the-child-marriage-restraint-act-2025-for-islamabad-capital-territory/>

3. Children's rights – an imperative to move ahead

When I reflect upon this process, I end up thinking about the countless children I have met around the world. How far apart is their daily life from the principles and provisions of the Convention?

Time and time again, I hear the message a young Syrian refugee shared with me. This is what he said:

“You know, I have dreamt a lot...But nothing changes... So, I am tired of dreaming... The problem is that it feels like hanging on a rope...And we never know whether the rope will hold, or it will break...”

Clearly, we cannot let the rope break!

It is true that in today's world, human rights face constant pushbacks. International law is being neglected; binding legal obligations ignored; international justice institutions targeted by sanctions; human rights and humanitarian organizations undermined, defunded and compromised in their ability to serve the most vulnerable, and to exact accountability for the most serious violations.

The world in a state of turmoil... Moving forward seems hard, demanding, unsurmountable.

But our commitment to children's rights outnumbers all these risks! In fact, it is at times of difficulties, when international legal order is under threat, when countries are ravaged by war, political instability, economic uncertainty and unpredictable climate change that our determination to safeguard children's rights matters the most! It is then, more than ever, that we must vigorously chart ahead.

As Martin Luther King used to say: “If you cannot run, walk; if you cannot walk, crawl; but by all means keep moving ahead!”

4. Steady progress made

Dear Friends,

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is not a magic wand. But it provides a strategic roadmap to help move ahead faster, better and further in our journey for the realization of children's rights. We need to build upon its lessons and unique potential.

I was privileged to participate in the drafting of the Convention. There were also many pushbacks during those long and difficult years: political confrontation, divisive tension, deep mistrust...

At the start, it was difficult to agree on anything, with such contrasting ideological positions and different approaches to human rights and children's concerns.

But, as it often happens, children – our topic, our agenda – helped to create an incremental space of convergence and became a powerful bridge builder:

- A bridge between different legal systems
- Between countries' different levels of development
- And between far apart political positions and diverse cultural approaches.

In the end, the Convention was adopted by consensus, it entered into force quicker than any previous treaty, and it soon became the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the history of the United Nations. With its binding nature, it provided a common legal framework and policy guidance to promote progress across nations and foster cross fertilization of experiences.

The Convention was groundbreaking in so many ways. For the first time, it brought together children's civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, all inalienable, indivisible and inherent to the human dignity of the child.

Importantly, it made a paradigm shift in the way children are envisaged: not anymore as passive beneficiaries of services or adults in the making, but as full-fledged citizens.

This seems obvious today... but it was decades in the making.

For many States, it was the first time they committed to a human rights treaty. It was also the first time they accepted a system of international scrutiny, monitored through periodic and public assessments of progress by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Through a constructive dialogue, this monitoring process helped to acknowledge national positive developments, as well as to expose deficiencies and serious human rights violations, and to shed light on the most invisible and voiceless children.

Rather than finger pointing, it engaged UN agencies, civil society organizations and other competent bodies in a dynamic process of international cooperation and technical assistance to advance national implementation efforts.

The Convention set legal binding obligations in previously unaddressed human rights areas: the rights of children with disabilities, freedom from violence, adoption and inter-country adoption; respect for the environment... Today, these are central topics for policy making.

But the truth is that they were deeply ignored and ill-perceived in the 80's. With this pioneering approach, the Convention informed the development of new international and regional legal standards and influenced groundbreaking decisions. The recent Advisory Opinions of the Inter American Court on Human Rights⁶ and the International Court of Justice on States obligations under international law to protect the climate system and prevent environmental degradation are remarkable illustrations.

Today, the Convention is reinforced by three Optional Protocols: on children's protection in war times, on freedom from sexual exploitation, and on a system of complaints for children's rights violations.

But the story does not end here. Early next week, discussions on a fourth Protocol will start in Geneva, to formally and explicitly recognize early childhood care and education as a core dimension of the right to education, and to ensure public pre-primary education and secondary education free for all children. Clearly, a crucial debate to follow and a unique opportunity to reaffirm and safeguard the rights of the child.

Dear Friends,

These are some brief highlights of our landmark Convention. They tell a story of success which is well-known to all of us in the child rights community. But this story remains an unfamiliar narrative for those outside our universe.

⁶ The Court broke new ground and set a powerful precedent in affirming the human right to a healthy climate, the right to remedy and reparation of climate harm, and the absolute legal prohibition on conduct that causes irreversible damage to the environment and the climate on which all life depends

Part of our accountability for children's rights is to publicize it better and make people feel excited about its achievements. Success breeds success, fuels optimism, and helps to accelerate momentum to overcome adversity and further advance the child rights agenda.

5. Major threats for children

We clearly have good news to spread. But they are not good enough. As stressed by my Syrian refugee friend, for millions of children the ideals of the Convention remain distant and illusory.

Children represent less than one third of the world's population. But they constitute more than half of those living in extreme poverty⁷ ⁸ and almost half of those forcibly displaced.

Violence remains a silent emergency. Every four minutes, a child dies from an act of violence. Children suffer physical, emotional and sexual violence online or offline, in care centers, in schools, in church institutions, and also within the family.⁹ Sadly, most children suffer in silence and loneliness. They feel too frightened to speak up, uncertain they will be heard, lacking the necessary information to seek help, and constantly missing the support they require for their healing, recovery and reintegration.

One in every five children struggle to survive in war affected countries. Sadly, 2024 was the year with the highest number of grave violations against children affected by conflict – a tragic 25% increase over the previous year.

Sexual violence has become a routine tactic of war. In the DRC, a child is raped every half hour, survivors are as young as toddlers.

⁷ World Bank Group - Global Trends in Child Monetary Poverty According to International Poverty Lines

⁸ In the EU, close to twenty million children are at risk of poverty and social exclusion: Eurostat <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250528-1#:~:text=24%25%20of%20EU%20children%20at,social%20exclusion%20%2D%20News%20articles%20%2D%20Eurostat>

⁹ UNICEF data: Two in every three children regularly endure violent punishment by caregivers at home; according to the Global Progress Report on SDG 16 Indicators (July 2024) 8 in every 10 children under 14 endure some form of psychological aggression or physical punishment at home

In Sudan, more than half of the 12 million displaced people are children - many are malnourished, separated from their families, and deeply traumatized. 90% are out of school.

In the Middle East, a child is displaced, maimed or killed every single second. Gaza stands out. It has recorded more child deaths than any other conflict – 28 children a day, the size of a classroom gone... It has the largest cohort of child amputees in modern history.¹⁰ Thousands of children have lost their caregivers.¹¹ Children are hardest hit by famine,¹² many of them facing the impossible daily choice between gunfire or starvation. Life expectancy at birth declined by 35 years in 2024.

The COVID 19 pandemic seems far away, but its scars persist. The recovery from its profound impact on children's lives is slow and demanding - rising economic uncertainty and high child poverty rates,¹³ school closures disrupting education and causing a sharp decline in academic skills,¹⁴ a worrying increase in mental health problems, reduced child support services, a surge in food prices leading to child's severe food insecurity, often irreversible for the youngest children. For countless children, especially in low-income countries, there will be no second chance...

6. Children are missing from the equation

Such a dire situation with cumulative risks for children calls for a deep sense of urgency. Unfortunately, the plight and the rights of children seem to be largely missing from the equation.

¹⁰ The Lancet, 24 May 2025

¹¹ More than 44.000 by mid-August

¹² Famine confirmed as man-made disaster by IPC report on 22 August

https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Gaza_Aug2025.pdf?fbclid=IwQ0xDSwMVbdRleHRuA2FibQlxMQABHjMlv5zERSmdoMgL8eW9lx2vDCzISNdICTC-Fx2IUwi1O7cyyQGalMyAY96o_aem_urma5Kiigyof2JE5bHlvPw

¹³ Child poverty increased by 15% and in less than two years additional 100 million children have fallen into poverty

¹⁴ Report Card 19, UNICEF Research Office May 2025

While their needs continue to grow, Official Development Assistance¹⁵ (ODA) is plummeting to worrying levels. In 2025 alone, ODA may fall 17%.¹⁶ Health funding may drop to 60%.¹⁷

Cuts to multilateral organizations – from UNICEF to WHO, WFP¹⁸ or UNHCR trigger a second wave of shrinking funds. The poorest countries will be hardest hit, many of them struggling to service their external debt with very scarce resources to invest in health and education. And human rights bodies are impacted too, with the Committee on the Rights of the Child unable to meet and continue to promote its crucial monitoring role.

Does this mean that our troubled world has limited resources?

Well, two indicators blatantly deny this assertion. Military expenditure has reached historic levels and the steepest rise since World War II.¹⁹ In 2024 alone, there was a 9,4% increase. To put this in perspective, military spending is now over 100 times the amount needed for humanitarian assistance.²⁰

Also in 2024, billionaire wealth grew three times faster than the year before. On average, each billionaire saw their fortune grow by \$2 billion a day.²¹ In striking contrast, the number of people living in poverty has barely changed since 1990.²²

7. Accountability for children's rights

¹⁵ Since the 50's, donor countries have made a commitment to allocate 0.7% of their Gross National Income as ODA to developing countries. Only a few have honored this pledge and many are cutting aid funding

¹⁶ In the case of the United States, aid funding cuts in health, nutrition, education and humanitarian assistance could lead to the death of additional 4,5 million children under five years of age - The Lancet "Evaluating the impact of two decades of USAID interventions and projecting the effects of defunding on mortality up to 2030: a retrospective impact evaluation and forecasting analysis 2025

¹⁷ US aid cuts alone may lead to additional 4.5 million deaths of children under five.

¹⁸ Impact for WFP includes cutting 25% to 30% of its global workforce

¹⁹ In 2024, military expenditure increased 9.4% from the previous year

²⁰ Humanitarian needs are just 13% funded. During the 2025 NATO Summit, humanitarian organizations asked for just 1% of defense budgets.

²¹ According to Oxfam Report 2025, in 2024, billionaire wealth grew \$2 trillion

²² World Bank data quoted by Oxfam Report 2025

This is a daunting scenario. And we may feel tempted by despair. But the truth is that our role is more important than ever!

It is upon us to firmly champion children's rights – with governments, parliaments, local authorities, businesses, the media, international institutions, with everyone.

Accountability for children's rights is serious. We need to make it work.

There may be no blueprint, but there is a simple way to start. First, we go back to the basics. Guided by the ethos of the Convention, we must relentlessly press for all decisions to be guided by the best interests of the child; the protection of each child from discrimination and abuse; firm investment to secure child survival and full development; genuine respect for the views of the child; allocation of all available resources to their maximum extent; child impact assessments on proposed legislative, policy or budgetary decisions; no derogation of children's rights in times of political instability or financial crisis...

You know it all! And what a difference this will make!

Second, we must be credible catalysts for change. This is key to overcoming ill perceptions, false assumptions, fake news... And we have a great foundation to build upon: the clarity, rigor and precision of international human rights law; the evidence built over more than three decades of child rights implementation; and most importantly, the key to success: the extraordinary determination, knowledge, skills and experience you all bring.

Third, we need to keep reinforcing our movement, strengthening partnerships and mobilizing people from all walks of life, in small places where children's human rights gain real meaning.

And never forget children are the most compelling reason for action. They may emerge from the depths of the worst nightmares, but they remain resilient, generous and forward-looking. They are not naïve about today's problems but remain optimistic about the future: a future where children are the first line of investment, empowered to have a seat at the table and committed to achieving lasting change.

Dear Friends,

Over the past years we have gained unique knowledge and experience. We understand the challenges that persist but also know the strategies that work best to overcome them. We have a normative roadmap to guide us and an unwavering commitment to forge ahead.

To accomplish great things, we must not only act but also dream; not only plan but also believe. As stressed by my favorite Portuguese Poet, also a tireless human rights defender:

“Whenever needed, start again...

No rush, no anguish...

In all steps you will take in that arduous journey towards the future,

Move ahead freely.

Until you succeed

Never cease!

And don't ever feel content with just half of a fruit.”