



Photo: Anna Kari, Save the Children UK

Pushing for change: a case study in child rights campaigning

Children's rights coalitions should be the eyes and ears of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in the run-up to a State examination, argues Carolyne Willow, who tells all about seizing the media spotlight and the attention of politicians.

Soon after the UN voted to adopt the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), James Grant, the then head of UNICEF, described this new human rights treaty as the children's Magna Carta.

The UNCRC has now come of age, yet children's status as full human beings with individual needs, preferences and capabilities has yet to take root. Just five

years ago, global leaders acknowledged that the world is still not fit for children and reaffirmed their commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the UNCRC.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is a tremendously important body, persuading and sometimes demanding that individual States do much better for their children as well as issuing

authoritative guidance on children's rights issues. But this group of 18 adults cannot alone protect the human rights of two billion children. That responsibility lies with the broader children's rights movement, especially national coalitions.

The Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) was established in 1991, a few months before the United Kingdom (UK) ratified the UNCRC in 1991. CRAE now

has over 380 member organisations and engages in various children's rights advocacy initiatives, from trying to transform the juvenile justice system to extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds to promoting UNCRC education in schools.

When the Committee on the Rights of the Child last examined the UK, in 2002, there was a lot of media debate. CRAE briefed journalists in advance of the Concluding Observations – or recommendations made by the Committee – being issued, and had high-profile commentators available for interview. We wrote to politicians and persuaded civil servants involved in the reporting process to run seminars bringing together government officials and NGOs for detailed discussions on the Committee's observations and recommendations. After about six months, interest started to fade, so we decided to publish an annual report entitled *State of children's rights in England*, using the Committee's 78 recommendations as the framework.

Every year since November 2003, we have reviewed government action on each of the Committee's Concluding Observations, and summarised overall progress. In 2003, we concluded that there had been significant progress on 26 of the Committee's 78 recommendations, but by 2006 this had reduced to only 12 areas of significant progress. With the exception of one year, when there was no coverage at all, our reports have been covered widely in the press, including on the front page of national newspapers. The Committee next examines the UK in 2008. In preparation for this, CRAE released extracts of its draft report to a national Sunday newspaper with an estimated 800,000 readership. The material made front-page news, with the headline 'The report that every parent in Britain should read'.

We circulate a copy of our annual children's rights reports to government ministers, members of Parliament and civil servants, sparking debates in the House of Commons. When draft legislation is passing through Parliament, we use the Concluding Observations to drive through positive change. We also quote from the Committee's general comments and discussion days. For example, during the passage of the Bill

establishing England's Children's Commissioner, CRAE highlighted at every opportunity the Committee's recommendation that the role must be compliant with the Paris Principles, which set out standards for national human rights institutions for children, and quoted its advice.

We were able to achieve 11 significant improvements to the legislation – for example improvements relating to the Children's Commissioner's duty to have regard to the UNCRC and independent powers to establish an inquiry and enter premises. However, the general role of the commissioner remains too narrow in representing the views and interests of children, rather than in promoting and protecting their rights.

We have used the Committee's Concluding Observations on the UK in our submissions to other UN and European human rights bodies.

We have translated the Concluding Observations for children, so that they know what government ministers are meant to be doing to uphold their human rights treaty. This year we managed to obtain a major grant to establish a three-year child-led research and advocacy project, focused on the UNCRC's reporting

process and the UK's forthcoming examination. The project is called Get Ready for Geneva, and more than 80 children are already actively engaged as children's rights investigators, local children's rights champions, and members of the website and communications team. The project website gives information about the UNCRC and the reporting process, and collects children's views and experiences. There are online surveys, polls and a 'Pivi Swap' where children get to describe what they would do if they were prime minister for a week.

Once the next set of Concluding Observations on the UK are issued, children will select their priorities and set up campaigns to achieve the changes recommended by the Committee.

It is not only the UK Concluding Observations that fuel our national advocacy. Our government is considering a British Bill of Rights. Here, we have found the Committee's consistent recommendation of incorporation of the UNCRC, as well as its General Measures of Implementation, most useful. We have used the UK and other countries' Concluding Observations when lobbying in Parliament for participation rights for school students, when defending the



Photo: Anna Kari. Save the Children UK



Photo: Effie Fotaki, Save the Children UK

privacy rights of young people in trouble with the law, and when opposing new restraint powers for prison staff. The State and NGO reports available on the Committee's website are an invaluable source of information which enables us to make international comparisons – very popular with the British media and something politicians often take note of.

Our primary task as a children's rights coalition is to defend the rights children have and to push for greater implementation of the UNCRC. The Committee's body of principles is as important to us as legally binding judgments of, say, the European Court of Human Rights. Children's rights coalitions should serve as the eyes and ears of the Committee in the run-up to a State examination. Once recommendations are issued, we have a duty to translate pieces of paper into concrete action. We must be creative and persistent in using the tools given by the Committee: the UNCRC is helping to transform young lives but children are still not enjoying the childhood that our rich world owes them.

Carolyne Willow is National Coordinator for the Child Rights Alliance for England (CRAE). Contact: info@crae.org.uk

Children's Rights Alliance for England:
www.crae.org.uk
Get ready for Geneva:
www.getreadyforgeneva.org.uk
