



Convention on the Rights of the Child

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The role of independent national human rights institutions in the promotion and protection of the rights of the child

1. Article 4 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges States parties to “undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention”. Independent national human rights institutions (NHRIs) are an important mechanism to promote and ensure the implementation of the Convention, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child considers the establishment of such bodies to fall within the commitment made by States parties upon ratification to ensure the implementation of the Convention and advance the universal realization of children’s rights. In this regard, the Committee has welcomed the establishment of NHRIs and children’s ombudspersons/children’s commissioners and similar independent bodies for the promotion and monitoring of the implementation of the Convention in a number of States parties.
2. The Committee issues this general comment in order to encourage States parties to establish an independent institution for the promotion and monitoring of implementation of the Convention and to support them in this regard by elaborating the essential elements of such institutions and the activities which should be carried out by them. Where such institutions have already been established, the Committee calls upon States to review their status and effectiveness for promoting and protecting children’s rights, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant international instruments.
3. The World Conference on Human Rights, held in 1993, in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action reaffirmed “... the important and constructive role played by national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights”, and encouraged “... the establishment and strengthening of national institutions”. The General Assembly and the

Commission on Human Rights have repeatedly called for the establishment of national human rights institutions, underlining the important role NHRIs play in promoting and protecting human rights and enhancing public awareness of those rights. In its general guidelines for periodic reports, the Committee requires that States parties furnish information on “any independent body established to promote and protect the rights of the child ...”,¹ hence, it consistently addresses this issue during its dialogue with States parties.

4. NHRIs should be established in compliance with the Principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (The “Paris Principles”) adopted by the General Assembly in 1993² transmitted by the Commission on Human Rights in 1992.³ These minimum standards provide guidance for the establishment, competence, responsibilities, composition, including pluralism, independence, methods of operation, and quasi-judicial activities of such national bodies.

5. While adults and children alike need independent NHRIs to protect their human rights, additional justifications exist for ensuring that children’s human rights are given special attention. These include the facts that children’s developmental state makes them particularly vulnerable to human rights violations; their opinions are still rarely taken into account; most children have no vote and cannot play a meaningful role in the political process that determines Governments’ response to human rights; children encounter significant problems in using the judicial system to protect their rights or to seek remedies for violations of their rights; and children’s access to organizations that may protect their rights is generally limited.

6. Specialist independent human rights institutions for children, ombudspersons or commissioners for children’s rights have been established in a growing number of States parties. Where resources are limited, consideration must be given to ensuring that the available resources are used most effectively for the promotion and protection of everyone’s human rights, including children’s, and in this context development of a broad-based NHRI that includes a specific focus on children is likely to constitute the best approach. A broad-based NHRI should include within its structure either an identifiable commissioner specifically responsible for children’s rights, or a specific section or division responsible for children’s rights.

7. It is the view of the Committee that every State needs an independent human rights institution with responsibility for promoting and protecting children’s rights. The Committee’s principal concern is that the institution, whatever its form, should be able, independently and effectively, to monitor, promote and protect children’s rights. It is essential that promotion and protection of children’s rights is “mainstreamed” and that all human rights institutions existing in a country work closely together to this end.

Mandate and powers

8. NHRIs should, if possible, be constitutionally entrenched and must at least be legislatively mandated. It is the view of the Committee that their mandate should include as broad a scope as possible for promoting and protecting human rights, incorporating the Convention on the Rights of the Child, its Optional Protocols and other relevant international human rights instruments - thus effectively covering children’s human rights, in particular their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The legislation should include provisions

setting out specific functions, powers and duties relating to children linked to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols. If the NHRI was established before the existence of the Convention, or without expressly incorporating it, necessary arrangements, including the enactment or amendment of legislation, should be put in place so as to ensure conformity of the institution's mandate with the principles and provisions of the Convention.

9. NHRIs should be accorded such powers as are necessary to enable them to discharge their mandate effectively, including the power to hear any person and obtain any information and document necessary for assessing the situations falling within their competence. These powers should include the promotion and protection of the rights of all children under the jurisdiction of the State party in relation not only to the State but to all relevant public and private entities.

Establishment process

10. The NHRI establishment process should be consultative, inclusive and transparent, initiated and supported at the highest levels of Government and inclusive of all relevant elements of the State, the legislature and civil society. In order to ensure their independence and effective functioning, NHRIs must have adequate infrastructure, funding (including specifically for children's rights, within broad-based institutions), staff, premises, and freedom from forms of financial control that might affect their independence.

Resources

11. While the Committee acknowledges that this is a very sensitive issue and that State parties function with varying levels of economic resources, the Committee believes that it is the duty of States to make reasonable financial provision for the operation of national human rights institutions in light of article 4 of the Convention. The mandate and powers of national institutions may be meaningless, or the exercise of their powers limited, if the national institution does not have the means to operate effectively to discharge its powers.

Pluralistic representation

12. NHRIs should ensure that their composition includes pluralistic representation of the various elements of civil society involved in the promotion and protection of human rights. They should seek to involve, among others, the following: human rights, anti-discrimination and children's rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including child- and youth-led organizations; trade unions; social and professional organizations (of doctors, lawyers, journalists, scientists, etc.); universities and experts, including children's rights experts. Government departments should be involved in an advisory capacity only. NHRIs should have appropriate and transparent appointment procedures, including an open and competitive selection process.

Providing remedies for breaches of children's rights

13. NHRIs must have the power to consider individual complaints and petitions and carry out investigations, including those submitted on behalf of or directly by children. In order to be able to effectively carry out such investigations, they must have the powers to compel and question

witnesses, access relevant documentary evidence and access places of detention. They also have a duty to seek to ensure that children have effective remedies - independent advice, advocacy and complaints procedures - for any breaches of their rights. Where appropriate, NHRIs should undertake mediation and conciliation of complaints.

14. NHRIs should have the power to support children taking cases to court, including the power (a) to take cases concerning children's issues in the name of the NHRI and (b) to intervene in court cases to inform the court about the human rights issues involved in the case.

Accessibility and participation

15. NHRIs should be geographically and physically accessible to all children. In the spirit of article 2 of the Convention, they should proactively reach out to all groups of children, in particular the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, such as (but not limited to) children in care or detention, children from minority and indigenous groups, children with disabilities, children living in poverty, refugee and migrant children, street children and children with special needs in areas such as culture, language, health and education. NHRI legislation should include the right of the institution to have access in conditions of privacy to children in all forms of alternative care and to all institutions that include children.

16. NHRIs have a key role to play in promoting respect for the views of children in all matters affecting them, as articulated in article 12 of the Convention, by Government and throughout society. This general principle should be applied to the establishment, organization and activities of national human rights institutions. Institutions must ensure that they have direct contact with children and that children are appropriately involved and consulted. Children's councils, for example, could be created as advisory bodies for NHRIs to facilitate the participation of children in matters of concern to them.

17. NHRIs should devise specially tailored consultation programmes and imaginative communication strategies to ensure full compliance with article 12 of the Convention. A range of suitable ways in which children can communicate with the institution should be established.

18. NHRIs must have the right to report directly, independently and separately on the state of children's rights to the public and to parliamentary bodies. In this respect, States parties must ensure that an annual debate is held in Parliament to provide parliamentarians with an opportunity to discuss the work of the NHRI in respect of children's rights and the State's compliance with the Convention.

Recommended activities

19. The following is an indicative, but not exhaustive, list of the types of activities which NHRIs should carry out in relation to the implementation of children's rights in light of the general principles of the Convention. They should:

(a) Undertake investigations into any situation of violation of children's rights, on complaint or on their own initiative, within the scope of their mandate;

- (b) Conduct inquiries on matters relating to children's rights;
- (c) Prepare and publicize opinions, recommendations and reports, either at the request of national authorities or on their own initiative, on any matter relating to the promotion and protection of children's rights;
- (d) Keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice relating to the protection of children's rights;
- (e) Promote harmonization of national legislation, regulations and practices with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, its Optional Protocols and other international human rights instruments relevant to children's rights and promote their effective implementation, including through the provision of advice to public and private bodies in construing and applying the Convention;
- (f) Ensure that national economic policy makers take children's rights into account in setting and evaluating national economic and development plans;
- (g) Review and report on the Government's implementation and monitoring of the state of children's rights, seeking to ensure that statistics are appropriately disaggregated and other information collected on a regular basis in order to determine what must be done to realize children's rights;
- (h) Encourage ratification of or accession to any relevant international human rights instruments;
- (i) In accordance with article 3 of the Convention requiring that the best interests of children should be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them, ensure that the impact of laws and policies on children is carefully considered from development to implementation and beyond;
- (j) In light of article 12, ensure that the views of children are expressed and heard on matters concerning their human rights and in defining issues relating to their rights;
- (k) Advocate for and facilitate meaningful participation by children's rights NGOs, including organizations comprised of children themselves, in the development of domestic legislation and international instruments on issues affecting children;
- (l) Promote public understanding and awareness of the importance of children's rights and, for this purpose, work closely with the media and undertake or sponsor research and educational activities in the field;
- (m) In accordance with article 42 of the Convention which obligates State parties to "make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike", sensitize the Government, public agencies and the general public to the provisions of the Convention and monitor ways in which the State is meeting its obligations in this regard;

- (n) Assist in the formulation of programmes for the teaching of, research into and integration of children's rights in the curricula of schools and universities and in professional circles;
- (o) Undertake human rights education which specifically focuses on children (in addition to promoting general public understanding about the importance of children's rights);
- (p) Take legal proceedings to vindicate children's rights in the State or provide legal assistance to children;
- (q) Engage in mediation or conciliation processes before taking cases to court, where appropriate;
- (r) Provide expertise in children's rights to the courts, in suitable cases as *amicus curiae* or *intervenor*;
- (s) In accordance with article 3 of the Convention which obliges States parties to "ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision", undertake visits to juvenile homes (and all places where children are detained for reform or punishment) and care institutions to report on the situation and to make recommendations for improvement;
- (t) Undertake such other activities as are incidental to the above.

Reporting to the Committee on the Rights of the Child and cooperation between NHRIs and United Nations agencies and human rights mechanisms

20. NHRIs should contribute independently to the reporting process under the Convention and other relevant international instruments and monitor the integrity of government reports to international treaty bodies with respect to children's rights, including through dialogue with the Committee on the Rights of the Child at its pre-sessional working group and with other relevant treaty bodies.

21. The Committee requests that States parties include detailed information on the legislative basis and mandate and principal relevant activities of NHRIs in their reports to the Committee. It is appropriate for States parties to consult with independent human rights institutions during the preparation of reports to the Committee. However, States parties must respect the independence of these bodies and their independent role in providing information to the Committee. It is not appropriate to delegate to NHRIs the drafting of reports or to include them in the government delegation when reports are examined by the Committee.

22. NHRIs should also cooperate with the special procedures of the Commission on Human Rights, including country and thematic mechanisms, in particular the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

23. The United Nations has a long-standing programme of assistance for the establishment and strengthening of national human rights institutions. This programme, which is based in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), provides technical assistance and facilitates regional and global cooperation and exchanges among national human rights institutions. States parties should avail themselves of this assistance where necessary. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also offers expertise and technical cooperation in this area.

24. As articulated in article 45 of the Convention, the Committee may also transmit, as it considers appropriate, to any specialized United Nations agency, OHCHR and any other competent body any reports from States parties that contain a request or indicate a need for technical advice or assistance in the establishment of NHRIs.

NHRIs and States parties

25. The State ratifies the Convention on the Rights of the Child and takes on obligations to implement it fully. The role of NHRIs is to monitor independently the State's compliance and progress towards implementation and to do all it can to ensure full respect for children's rights. While this may require the institution to develop projects to enhance the promotion and protection of children's rights, it should not lead to the Government delegating its monitoring obligations to the national institution. It is essential that institutions remain entirely free to set their own agenda and determine their own activities.

NHRIs and NGOs

26. Non-governmental organizations play a vital role in promoting human rights and children's rights. The role of NHRIs, with their legislative base and specific powers, is complementary. It is essential that institutions work closely with NGOs and that Governments respect the independence of both NHRIs and NGOs.

Regional and international cooperation

27. Regional and international processes and mechanisms can strengthen and consolidate NHRIs through shared experience and skills, as NHRIs share common problems in the promotion and protection of human rights in their respective countries.

28. In this respect, NHRIs should consult and cooperate with relevant national, regional and international bodies and institutions on children's rights issues.

29. Children's human rights issues are not constrained by national borders and it has become increasingly necessary to devise appropriate regional and international responses to a variety of child rights issues (including, but not limited to, the trafficking of women and children, child pornography, child soldiers, child labour, child abuse, refugee and migrant children, etc.). International and regional mechanisms and exchanges are encouraged, as they provide NHRIs with an opportunity to learn from each other's experience, collectively strengthen each other's positions and contribute to resolving human rights problems affecting both countries and regions.

Notes

¹ General guidelines regarding the form and contents of periodic reports to be submitted by States parties under article 44, paragraph 1 (b), of the Convention (CRC/C/58), para. 18.

² Principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (The "Paris Principles"), General Assembly resolution 48/134 of 20 December 1993, annex.

³ Commission on Human Rights resolution 1992/54 of 3 March 1992, annex.

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