

Participation of Children in the Media

Children are sometimes given a voice in the media when, for instance, school problems are covered. But most other issues seem to be reserved for adults. Even when news reporters talk with ordinary people in the street about current events, they seldom turn to children. From a journalistic point of view this appears to be a missed opportunity; children do belong to society and their views are relevant.

Though governments cannot orchestrate media on such aspects, they have in fact — after the ratification of the UN Convention — some responsibility in this area. The first paragraph of Article 12 reads:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

This very article has been defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as one of the *principles* of the convention. However, there are some other articles which also underpin this dimension of the convention. One is Article 13, the first part of which says:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Key provisions in relation to media are outlined in Article 17, which starts as follows:

States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

(a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of Article 29;

(b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;

(c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;

(d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;

There are two major tendencies in these articles. One is about freedom of expression and *access to the media*, the other one is treating the media as an *educational tool*. Though clearly distinct, the two aspects inter-relate.

Implementation of the Right to Access to the Media

Even if the media are largely run privately in a country, the authorities could undertake some supportive measures, for instance through financial incentives, in order to guarantee a supply of children's literature and programmes. This may especially be the case for the production and dissemination of information material in minority languages.

However, the country reports so far received by the monitoring UN Committee on the Rights of the Child show a mixed picture of implementation.⁶ Several reports in fact mention nothing or almost nothing about any of the aspects of Article 17, including about access to the media. So was the case with reports from, for instance, Indonesia, Pakistan, Ukraine, Jamaica, Argentina and Paraguay. Cyprus and Chile only made brief references to their constitutions. The impression left is that there is no deliberate policy or government plan in relation to children and the media.

Other reports have been more precise. Many of them are detailed on measures taken to encourage dissemination of child-oriented materials through the press, radio and television, video recordings and books. On this point there are, not surprisingly, differences between the countries based on available resources.

The report from Nepal states:

In the rural areas, children do not have access to the above resources (child literature and broadcasts) due to transportation and communication problems... There is also little diversity in the materials available for children, whether they be on TV, radio or in newspapers. The ability to gain something from the media is largely determined by the educational status and literacy levels of children.

The reports from Yemen and Honduras flag similar constraints and such concerns are also voiced by

6. Reports by States Parties are available at the UN Centre for Human Rights in Geneva. They should, according to the convention itself, be made "widely available to the public in their own countries."