

FAITH AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

GOVERNMENTS AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES WORKING TOGETHER TO CHAMPION CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

SUMMARY

There is a strong complementarity between the guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the core values of religious teachings. The global study, *Faith and Children's Rights: A Multi-religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, captures the often undocumented yet significant role that the diverse communities of the world's faith traditions have played in the drafting, adoption, ratification and implementation of the CRC over the past three decades. The Study discusses the foundational values of the CRC and provides a unique, interfaith perspective as it reflects on the shared values found in the tenets of seven major religions: the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and the Sikh Faith. In total, these traditions have more than 5.5 billion adherents around the globe.

To encourage further implementation of the CRC as a key legal and ethical framework for safeguarding children's rights and to address the many risks facing children today, this policy brief highlights the specific recommendations from the Study, seeking to strengthen partnerships between religious communities and governments on advancing the implementation of the CRC and strengthening child protection.

By joining hands, governments and religious communities, in partnership with UN agencies and civil society organizations, can overcome multi-dimensional threats affecting children at the local, national, regional and global levels.

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations are in a uniquely strong position to champion children's rights by asserting their moral authority to make a positive difference in children's lives. They command extraordinary influence and often serve as role models of compassion, solidarity and justice. They help to bridge differences, foster dialogue, and influence positive social and behavioral change. The far-reaching influence of religious leaders and faith-based organizations is especially important in addressing sensitive social and cultural norms that deny and violate children's rights.

The opportunities highlighted in the Study and discussed in this policy brief create a unique and compelling case to put faith into action and promote interfaith collaboration in order to revitalize the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, inspiring positive change for all children.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Faith and Children's Rights: A Multi-Religious Study on the Convention Rights of the Child was conducted by Arigatou International over a period of one year in collaboration with UNICEF, the former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, and the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), and with the support of partners, the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) and World Vision International. It brought together child rights experts, religious leaders and scholars, and children and young people to engage in dialogue and reflect on the role of religious communities in promoting and protecting children's rights, since the adoption of the CRC in 1989.

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The Study was shaped by a series of global and regional multi-religious roundtables and other consultations with religious leaders and child rights experts, as well as focus groups with children in seven countries. It puts forward specific recommendations for multi-stakeholder collaboration to further the promotion and protection of children's rights, and to strengthen engagement with religious communities for the holistic well-being of all children.

The Study also highlights some areas with potential for strategic partnerships that can help realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is critical for the enjoyment of children's rights.

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND ACTORS AS KEY ALLIES

The CRC was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1989 and rapidly entered into force on September 30, 1990. Since then it has been ratified by all but one United Nations Member State, serving as proof of a growing global commitment to children's rights. The CRC's 30th anniversary is November 2019, a time when the world is facing critical challenges that are having a profound effect on the well-being of many children. They include climate change, the rise of extreme and violent ideologies, mass migration and forced displacement of millions of families, growing inequality, and newer threats such as online sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

As 84% of the world's population has a religious affiliation, religious communities play a decisive role in the promotion and protection of children's rights, and there is great potential for collaboration with other partners. They are key allies in addressing some of the most pressing issues that affect children today.

Religious actors play a critical role in supporting communities, parents, caregivers, teachers and children themselves to grow and thrive. They are also uniquely positioned to help communities address social norms that are detrimental to children's development and respect for their human dignity.

Religious communities and faith-based organizations have been responding to children's needs since long before the concept of child rights was formally reflected in international standards and treaties. Their principles and values traditionally support

positive child upbringing practices, reject all forms of violence against children, and protect and promote the sanctity of life in every stage of a child's development.

Religious communities were actively involved in the ten-year drafting process of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, making important contributions to the development of its provisions, and they also advocated for the CRC's adoption. Since the adoption of the treaty, diverse religious groups from around the world have mobilized and taken action to enhance awareness about children's rights and promote the implementation of the CRC.

The unprecedented and growing number of statements and declarations adopted over the last thirty years by diverse religious groups have also helped to recognize the complementarity between the tenets of the major religions and children's rights as enshrined in the CRC. These declarations from major interfaith gatherings, which have been endorsed by large numbers of religious leaders from all traditions, affirm the importance of collaboration between religious communities and national governments to support child protection. They further recognize the authoritative voice and influence, advocacy, accountability, and mobilization of religious leaders and communities for the development of public policies and laws to secure the development, care and protection of children from neglect, abuse and exploitation.

Despite the active engagement of many religious leaders at the global and regional levels, an important challenge has been to reach out to grassroots religious communities and to strengthen their awareness of the CRC. It is thus essential to further mobilize local faith communities in order to reach those children that are often left behind.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Increase support for the realization of children's rights, including to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and freedom of expression, as well as children's right to develop to their fullest potential, including their physical, mental, social, spiritual and moral development.**

More effort needs to be invested in strengthening Public Policies on Freedom of Religion and Belief that can integrate and prompt interfaith collaboration for the well-being of children in many countries. Governments have a primary responsibility for the protection of children and, as States Parties to the CRC, have committed to put in place laws and policies to ensure respect for children's rights including freedom of thought, conscience and religion and freedom of expression, in accordance with their evolving capacities and their protection from violence.

These efforts need to be supported by increased budget allocations and by strengthening programs in collaboration with religious communities and faith-based organizations to advance the protection of children's rights and the holistic well-being of children, including their spiritual development. This can be achieved, for example, by investing in programs related to education for dialogue and religious diversity that promote the value of and need for interreligious dialogue as a way to facilitate the protection of children's rights.

2. **Strengthen national, regional and international platforms for expanding collaboration among religious communities, governments, UN agencies, and civil**

society organizations, including with the participation of children, to advance the realization of children's rights.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential to advance progress in the promotion and protection of child rights, and to respond to the multi-dimensional threats faced by children today.

Creating spaces for dialogue at the national, regional and international level that include child-focused organizations, religious groups and child rights experts, is essential to address children's rights from a multi sectoral perspective, given the significance of religion for many families and the important role that religious institutions play in many parts of the world. Children and young people should always be included in these processes and allowed to participate meaningfully.

Additionally, interfaith collaboration can strengthen national policy-making processes by contributing to the design and implementation of inclusive, participatory and effective policies for the protection of children.

3. Expand collaboration and partnerships to protect children from all forms of violence, by working with religious communities to strengthen national child protection systems.

Religious communities can offer moral teachings and model practices to prevent, heal, reduce and ultimately end violence against children. It is critical to strengthen joint efforts between governments and religious communities to deepen understanding on and implement internationally agreed strategies and mechanisms to address violence against children, including Sustainable Development Goals 16.2 on ending

abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children; 5.2 and 5.3 on ending violence against women and girls; and 8.7 on ending economic exploitation of children and the elimination of child labor in all its forms.

Governments can also gain support from religious communities in the design and implementation of child safeguarding policies, given the ongoing work that many religious leaders and faith-based organizations are conducting within their own constituencies to promote change in attitudes and behaviours condoning violence against children and to advocate for the protection of children within the broader community. This form of collaboration can complement government efforts and benefit a larger number of children.

4. Initiate national dialogue, including religious groups, on a review of Reservations and Declarations to the CRC that may hinder the realization of children's rights.

A review of the reservations to the CRC could serve as an opportunity for constructive dialogue and action among governments, religious leaders and faith-based organizations, child-rights advocates, and children and youth. Reservations have an impact on the implementation of the legal obligations a State undertakes when it becomes a party to a human rights treaty. Religious leaders can become advocates for the withdrawal of such reservations when constructively engaged in the full promotion and implementation of the CRC.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child reviews each country's report on the implementation of the CRC every five years. This ongoing process is an opportunity to foster dialogue with religious communities on concerns affecting children and on how best to strengthen laws and policies for the fulfilment of their rights.