

Children's rights get short shrift in the 'lucky country'

Carolyn Hardy & Suzanne Dvorak, November 20, 2009

Today a dozen or so Australian schoolchildren will reveal their "creations" in an extraordinary exhibition that candidly illustrates how children view themselves.

The aim of the exhibit is to put the spotlight on our children as we today mark the 20th anniversary of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child - the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history.

The UN's convention has done much to transform the status of children globally through helping to decrease child mortality rates, raising awareness and better protection for children in conflict, strengthening the drive for universal education, and triggering legislative action to combat exploitation of children.

But new research by UNICEF shows there is still a long way to go. Today 1 billion children across the globe are deprived of at least one service essential to their survival and development such as health care, education, clean water, sanitation and adequate shelter.

Further, some 150 million children are involved in child labour, 101 million children do not attend primary school, 22 million children do not receive routine immunisation and 1.2 million children are trafficked each year. What these startling figures show is that children are too often in the frontline of economic and environmental shocks.

In our region Australia plays a critical role in helping to give children the opportunities they deserve. Through our overseas aid program, Australia funds programs to give children the basics of life both in natural disasters but also in everyday life.

But Australia could do more to fulfill its obligations under the convention here at home.

In 2005, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Australia adopt a national framework for children, enshrined in federal legislation, to make state-based children's policies more consistent to increase accountability.

But this has not happened and children's policies in education, health and protection still differ across the states and territories. Likewise, the role of existing state and territory children's commissions varies between jurisdictions. Some take a broad focus on enhancing children's wellbeing in the community while others concentrate on children and young people at risk.

This lack of cohesion means that insufficient attention is given to children and young people in the national, political arena. Australia needs a long-term, national plan for all children to raise their status and importance in society.

That an estimated 1530 Australian children died as a result of abuse or neglect in 2006, cramped conditions in juvenile detention forced some Australian children into adult facilities and nearly half of Australia's 100,000 homeless people are younger than 25 highlight the need for greater protection of children's rights in Australia.

Indigenous children are particularly at risk given they are six times more likely to be involved with the statutory child protection system than non-indigenous children. And figures released this month reveal that indigenous youths are almost 30 times more likely to be detained than non-indigenous youth.

Many asylum-seeker children are forced to live in closed immigration detention facilities – about two-thirds of the 82 asylum-seeker children on Christmas Island live in low-security camps in claustrophobic conditions that compromise their health and wellbeing, according to an Australian Human Rights Commission report.

But Australian children's rights are undermined in other ways. Inadequate access to education for children in remote regions, for those with disabilities and from culturally diverse backgrounds, limited representation of children's views in political and legal debates, low youth wages and restrictions on indigenous and homeless young people using public spaces are breaches of children's rights.

Maybe this stems from a fear that child rights somehow infringe on the rights of parents. Policy-makers need more focus on families and recognise the specific interests of children.

A national children's commissioner that promoted the rights of the children and young people, a policy proposed by the Democrats and the Labor Party before taking office, would provide national leadership and monitor and advocate for the wellbeing of Australian children. The commissioner should be an independent statutory officer with powers and authority determined after community consultation and enshrined in legislation. Importantly it would ensure that children do not continue to fall through the cracks in government policy.

But for a national children's commissioner office to be truly effective, it would need the resources and the scope to provide an independent voice for children on issues such as cyber-bullying, sexualisation of children in the media, indigenous disadvantage, education and domestic violence.

Poverty, child abuse, poor education standards and social disadvantage can't be effectively tackled without recognising the value of children in the community. This means giving them a voice at a national level and properly addressing children's rights to promote their growth and development.

Carolyn Hardy is chief executive of UNICEF Australia. Suzanne Dvorak is chief executive of Save the Children in Australia. This is an abridged version of their article which was published to mark the 20th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – at:
<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/childrens-rights-get-short-shrift-in-the-lucky-country-20091120-ip8b.html>