

Committee on the Rights of the Child  
Online limited 86th session  
18 January – 4 February 2021



Opening Address by  
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Chief  
Groups in Focus Section  
Human Rights Council and Treaty Mechanisms Division  
Representative of the Secretary-General

KUDO videoconference  
18 January 2021, 12:30 pm (Geneva time)

*Chair,*  
*Distinguished members,*  
*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

On behalf of the United Nations Secretary-General, it is an honour and privilege for me to open the online limited eighty-sixth session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. I wish you all a healthy and positive New Year with the hope that we can meet in person as soon as possible.

It has been a year since the first human cases of COVID-19 were recorded at the time we were preparing for the 84<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary Session in Samoa. While the last year was a testament to human resilience and adaptability, the future surrounding the pandemic and other existential challenges – including climate change and loss of biodiversity - remains uncertain. We entered 2021 with a soaring number of cases around the world including due to new variants of the virus that are highly infectious which of course is of deep concern for our children. The approval of vaccines was quickly done. These must be provided to all to ensure that their distribution does not exacerbate inequalities and ensure that not only the wealthier economies access a vaccine but that this is provided globally without discrimination.

While the aftermath of this pandemic will continue to affect us for many years to come, we have already witnessed its immediate and devastating impact, including psychologically, and on a reversal of decades of progress in children's rights. Within the last year, the number of children living in poverty has increased by 142 million. Reductions in health service coverage levels are leading to higher rates of child and infant mortality and malnutrition, and nearly 100 million children under the age of one are missing out on non-COVID 19 related life-saving vaccines due to COVID-19 measures. The number of children out of

school is expected to increase by nearly 25 million, and school closures continue to affect children – more than a third of all schoolchildren worldwide – who do not have access to remote education.

As we are all well aware, the loss of family incomes, disruption of child protection services and lockdowns, have led to increased risk and levels of violence, including sexual exploitation and neglect, for children. An estimated 1.8 billion children live in countries where violence prevention and responses services have been disrupted due to COVID-19. Children are also at risk of increased stress and posttraumatic distress, which will most certainly impact their mental health.

Across the world, children in situations of vulnerability continue to be disproportionately affected. These include children living in poverty, children living in conflict-affected countries or in refugee or migration detention camps, and other children deprived of their liberty, and children with disabilities. It is therefore imperative that States not only ensure the protection of the rights of children in the context of this pandemic but also mitigate its adverse impacts on them. No child should have to suffer the consequences of regressive measures taken in response to the pandemic.

*Chair,*

*Distinguished members,*

Your work to ensure that children are not left behind is therefore more and more crucial in the current challenging circumstances. We genuinely welcome and appreciate your enduring efforts, also between sessions, to ensure oversight through all available means of children's rights worldwide despite the various challenges in your everyday life. The challenges are considerable, including different time zones, connectivity issues and the inability to have face-to-face

discussions. However, the work you do, and we with you, is not in vain. Thanks to your decisions, children were allowed to go to school, mothers were not deported and children were reunited with their families. Your dedication to the Committee's work throughout the last year has served as a constant reminder to States and other stakeholders that children's rights must be protected in the context of a global pandemic, and that their voices must be heard.

Your General Comment, which shall be discussed during this session, on children's rights in relation to the digital environment could not come at a more timely moment. In the past year, we saw how increased digitalization facilitated remote learning and social interaction among children and their families during periods of lockdowns and travel bans. However, it also widened inequalities between children, increased their exposure to harmful online content and magnified risks of online sexual exploitation and cyber-bullying, especially in the absence of supervision of internet use and appropriate digital literacy skills. I congratulate the Committee on its efforts and perseverance to develop this draft throughout the last year – indeed through digital means – and look forward to using the final version as an important reference document.

*Chair,*  
*Distinguished members,*

Unfortunately, the regular budget recently adopted by the General Assembly for 2021 has yet, while approving the additional meeting time, not approved the commensurate requisite staff resources, including for the additional individual communications received under the Optional Protocol of the Convention on a communications procedure. What this translates to is that there are no additional staff resources to correct the shortfall in resources to support the human rights mechanisms.

*Chair,*

I will now recall recent developments regarding the rights of the child at the intergovernmental level. The annual full-day meeting of the Human Rights Council on children's rights this year will focus on the rights of the child and the Sustainable Development Goals. It is due to take place in hybrid format at the upcoming 46<sup>th</sup> Regular Session of the Council to be held from 22 February to 19 March 2021. The discussion will be complemented by way of a summary report as an input to related processes at the General Assembly concerning children. OHCHR is in the process of preparing its annual report on child rights to the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, which this year will address the 2021 theme "sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic". Our Office looks forward to working jointly with the Committee on the Rights of the Child in the development and implementation of these initiatives.

*Chair,*

*Distinguished members,*

I would like to particularly thank the four experts for whom this session will be their last, as Committee members – Amal Aldoseri, Olga Khazova, Cephas Lumina and former Chair Renate Winter. Thank you for your commitment and contribution to the work of the Committee and the development of jurisprudence on children's rights, including on child justice (*Renate*), State budgeting for children's rights (*Cephas*), family law (*Olga*), and human rights education (*Amal*). Because of your tireless efforts, it is now unthinkable that the Committee organizes an event without engaging children as speakers and advisors and involving them in the planning of related events. The Committee will have adopted a general comment in the middle of a global pandemic, no easy feat (*Olga*). There is now a working group dedicated to environmental issues

*(Cephas)*. And no one dares to go over the maximum number of paragraphs for lists of issues and lists of issues prior to reporting *(Renate)*.

I would like to close by also thanking the Chair Luis, Pedernera for his leadership, guidance and commitment to the Committee's work.

I wish you all the very best in 2021 and extend my best wishes for a successful and productive session.

Thank you.