African children at a crossroads

Thirty years ago world leaders rallied together and adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC), which was the most tangible demonstration of political will for future generations, at the highest level, ever. In ratifying the CRC, the voice of the global leaders was unequivocal: children should be placed at the centre of advancing humanity.

On its 30th Anniversary, the influence of this treaty is unparalleled and palpable. Its guiding principles are entrenched in numerous constitutions, laws, policies and practices across the world. Those guiding principles are: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and the right of children to express their views freely and to be heard.

These principles and articles have meant real progress for children. Child health has greatly improved. Through investment in vaccines and nutrition, the odds for life for children have more than doubled in Eastern and Southern Africa. The proportion of children out of school has more than halved from 30 years ago. Huge strides have been made to curtail harmful practices on children, among these child marriages and female genital mutilation.

Yet, as we celebrate the birthday of the CRC, and the accomplishments of the last three decades, a frank introspection on this great treatise is vital. We owe this to all children.

Much has changed for the African child since the treaty.

Over the past 30 years, the 21 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) have rapidly urbanised, there has been a technological revolution, and digital penetration though mobile technology has hugely increased. The technology and urbanisation have brought immense opportunities, and challenges.

As I go through the cities — be it the sprawling cities of Johannesburg, Nairobi or Kampala or the smaller urban areas in countries across the region — I see some of the most sophisticated health delivery systems. I see well-developed infrastructure, and improved access to service for children living in these urban settings.

But not so far from the glimmer I also see the mushrooming slums, a result of unplanned urbanisation. In those cities the equity gap is jarring. In the big slums of Kibera and Kanyanya, the poorest children are sometimes worse off — in terms of accessing health, education, water, sanitation and protection — than their rural peers. Technology has brought fresh protection challenges. Children face the threats ranging from online bullying by peers to online abuse where child sex offenders are fast adapting the latest technology to perpetuate crimes against children.

In this region, urbanisation and technology are clearly a paradox and as leaders we need to think in a nuanced manner on the needs and rights of children.

The challenges are often complex, but they are also clear. Take health: Africa needs to hire an additional 4.2 million health workers, to meet minimum World Health Organisation standards for front line skilled health personnel. And it needs them in the next 10 years.

On education: there remains a huge teaching deficit and Africa needs to recruit 4.5 million more primary schoolteachers by 2030.

ESA is also home to some of the longest and most protracted conflicts in the world, with heartbreaking grave violations against children, from recruitment to sexual violence; attacks on schools to the devastation of social services.

Finally, ESA is being hit hard by the climate crisis. Today there are more than 11 million people experiencing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity in nine Southern African countries. Governments and development partners are thus now facing the triple threat of disease, food insecurity and water scarcity.

It reads of woe; and yet it is of course a reality for too many children. Clearly then, as we look at the rights of the child, the CRC — and what it represents — is at a crossroads. I would propose four elements that can re-galvanise this great legacy on children's rights, for every child.

First, decisive national leadership is required; leadership which leads to the domestication of the key elements of the CRC. When leadership commits to seeing the spirit of the CRC in its statutes, laws and policies, the CRC comes alive for children. While all countries in Eastern and Southern Africa have ratified the CRC, some have not yet domesticated it. A clear rubric always lays foundation to stronger institutions and actions that support children.

Second, I propose that adequate, predictable and sustainable resources are invested in children. For the largest part this means domestic resources allocated for children. This means concerted actions to meet benchmarks such as the Abuja declaration in Health and the Incheon Declaration for Education.

Beyond traditional attention to primary education, it is key to invest in skills. Attention must be given to investing in and empowering Africa's girls and young women.

Third, Public/Private partnerships are key. The last 30 years has demonstrated that collaboration with private sector delivers tangible and transformative results for children, whether they are involved in the nutrition supply chain management or mobilising local resources for emergencies like cholera and Ebola.

Fourth, children as right holders should be given meaningful platforms to contribute to decisions that affect them. Governments and development partners should provide opportunities to co-create solutions and contribute to their development.

CRC advocates that children are holders of their own rights and have the right to express their views freely and to be heard and this is the most powerful aspect of the convention.

The CRC was one of the greatest moments for humanity. A moment when global leaders rallied for all children. The world has since evolved, but a child is still a child, and leaders from political and corporate centres of power still have a moral obligation to deliver for children.

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