Chapter Ten

Readability of Children’s Rights Documents: The LIASSO Experience

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Introduction

With the worldwide escalation of open/ethnic conflicts, militarization, political repression and religious fundamentalism, and the widening gap between North and South, human rights questions are assuming greater importance and urgency. Ratings of country human rights record compiled by Charles Humana show that 47 out of 104 major countries rated below the average rating of 62 percent. Among the countries that came low in the rating scale were African countries like Nigeria (49 percent), Libya (24 percent), Sudan (18 percent), Togo (48 percent), and Uganda (46 percent). These low ratings call for immediate action by governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and concerned citizens all over the world.

If regard for human rights is to be part of the world’s culture, then we must begin from the beginning. We must start with our children who, as adults of tomorrow, need to understand and respect human rights today in order to apply the lessons of today to their future lives and actions. Children who have learned violence and the abuse of human right are more likely to perpetuate the cycle of violence. It is the responsibility of adults to help break the cycle and reverse the history of low human rights ratings in different parts of the globe. The first step in this journey is for adults to recognize and respect the rights of children.

In the past six decades, many declarations and resolutions have been made at the global and continental levels to protect children from constant abuse in the hands of adults. In 1924 the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child was drawn up and adopted by member states of the United Nations to specifically protect the interests of children. The Declaration addressed specifically our collective responsibility to provide all categories of children—for example orphans,
delinquents, the homeless, and the hungry—with the material and human resources they need for physical and spiritual growth.

The special safeguards for children contained in the Declaration of 1924 were equally recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the statutes of specialized agencies and international organizations concerned with the welfare of children. In 1959, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed an additional declaration. This declaration called upon men and women as individuals, and upon voluntary organizations, local authorities and national governments to recognize the rights of children and strive for their observance. It was suggested that this should be done by legislative and other measures progressively taken in accordance with the principles stipulated in the 1959 declaration. Altogether, ten principles were outlined in that declaration in densely legal structure, all focusing on the rights of children to be well protected and adequately provided with full opportunities for proper developments.

There was also the 1989 convention in which the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 54 “Articles” on the rights of children. These articles among other things defined who “the child” is and outlined some provisions that states parties to the convention should follow to ensure that the physical, social, mental, and moral well-being of the child is well protected. The central principle underlying the 1989 provision is that children’s welfare should be paramount in making decision about their life and property. The African charter on the rights and welfare of children was also proclaimed in 1990 at Addis Ababa and it followed the content, pattern, and structure of the previous declarations and conventions. But in addition it specified the responsibilities of children. This was done in recognition of the need to preserve and strengthen positive African morals, traditional values, and cultures.

Unfortunately, despite all the Declarations, Resolutions, and Instruments on children’s rights, millions of children still suffer greatly and die in the hands of adults. In many countries today, children are engaged as soldiers in wars. Many children are economically exploited in industries, abused as prostitutes, beheaded for rituals, and die of malnutrition and neglect. Many people in different parts of the world, particularly in Africa, are still uninformed about the rights of children as specified in the numerous conventions.

The children’s rights documents, as they are, are useful as legal binding documents for United Nation member states. However, they are incomprehensible to many people, especially children. A careful study of the conventions and their articles shows that they all follow a consistent, peculiar, legal structure, which is uncommon to the common