

---

Faculty of Human and Social Development

Faculty Publications

---

The early childhood rights indicators: A tool to monitor the convention on the rights of the child and raise its profile globally

Ziba Vaghri, Adem Arkadas, Emily Hertzman and Clyde Hertzman

November 2009

© 2009 Bernard van Leer Foundation.

---

Citation for this paper:

Vaghri, Z., Arkadas, A., Hertzman, E., & Hertzman, C. (2008). The early childhood rights indicators: A tool to monitor the convention on the rights of the child and raise its profile globally. *Early Childhood Matters*, 113, 53-57.

# The early childhood rights indicators

A tool to monitor the Convention on the Rights of the Child and raise its profile globally

Ziba Vaghri, Adem Arkadas, Emily Hertzman and Clyde Hertzman,  
Human Early Learning Partnership, Canada

Early childhood is a time of special importance for physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. It is a time that has a huge influence on who the child becomes. These years are marked by extremely rapid development of the brain and other key biological systems.

Many adult health problems – including obesity, depression, heart disease and non-insulin-dependent diabetes – have their roots in the early years. Later literacy and numeracy skills are also affected by how a child develops in these years. To improve the health of their population and decrease inequities in health, it is critical for societies to invest in their children's early development (Irwin, Siddiqi and Hertzman 2007). This investment should include a system of universal protection, respect and fulfilment of the human rights of young children.

Human rights are an intrinsic prerogative of all human beings independent of the environment surrounding them (Chapman 1993). Human rights are protected by an international system that includes a series of treaties, each with its respective monitoring body, agreed amongst the signatory countries. But what does it mean for young children to have human rights? It means that every child should enjoy a safe and nurturing childhood in which they develop and grow to their full potential free from violence. Basically, children have the right to enjoy their childhood to the full; the right to have good

health, to learn and to play. Young children have the same rights and freedoms as all other children, but they are particularly vulnerable due to their age and special developmental needs. Because of these special needs, their survival and development require special attention to their early environments. Therefore, despite the above-mentioned concept that rights exist independent of environments, fulfilment of young children's rights cannot be separated from the nature of environments where they grow up, live, and learn. As a result, a universal safeguarding system is required to guarantee the realisation of young children's rights in countries across the globe.

The United Nations' Convention on the Right of the Child (referred to here as the UNCR or the Convention) is this universal safeguarding system that was adopted in 1989. The Convention is the most widely agreed legally binding international human rights document in the world, with 193 signatory countries. It provides a comprehensive framework that can protect and fulfil the rights of young children.

The Convention has a monitoring body – the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (referred to hereafter as the Committee). The Committee oversees a system of regular State reporting and provides guidance in the form of General Comments on the implementation of UNCR. These are authoritative interpretations of the provisions in UNCR<sup>1</sup>. It is noteworthy

that the Convention defines early childhood as the period below the age of 8 years.<sup>2</sup>

### **Monitoring the implementation of early childhood rights**

What is monitoring and why is it so important and germane to the realisation of the UNCRC? In this context, monitoring “is a broad term describing the active collection, verification and immediate use of information to address human rights problems. The term includes evaluative activities at the UN headquarters, as well as first hand fact gathering at country level”.<sup>3</sup>

In light of this definition, it is important to note that State Parties to the Convention are under an international legal obligation to submit periodic reports to the Committee on their progress towards implementation of the Convention (article 44 of the UNCRC). The Committee also has the prerogative to guide governments to implement and to report implementation of children’s rights properly. The Committee has thus far adopted 12 General Comments for these purposes.<sup>4</sup>

One of these is General Comment 7: Implementing Rights in Early Childhood (GC7). It was drafted and adopted in response to the observation that young children under the age of 8 years were often entirely overlooked in States Parties’ reporting of progress. The implication of this has been that States Parties have often neglected their

obligations towards young children, regarding them more as objects of care and need, than as rights bearers and active social participants. While GC7 represents authoritative guidance to State Parties in fulfilling their obligations to young children, without a corresponding operating framework of indicators, it has had very limited practical value and as a result has remained underutilised (Child Right Information Network 2009).

At this point, one needs to ask a set of questions as to how rights in texts can be transferred into rights in practice. Is the status of treaty ratification alone a good indicator of the realisation of a right? The existing evidence indicates no consistent associations between ratification of human rights treaties and health or social outcomes (Palmer et al. 2009). What seems to be the problem? Why can’t these treaties, prepared with good intentions and based on a sound knowledge base, be conducive to improved rights status? What are the obstacles? Does the problem stem from the gap between the theory and practice, or is the problem due to the lack of a tool that is sensitive enough to detect and measure relevant change? With respect to the former problem, stringent requirements for ratification of treaties, improved accountability mechanisms to monitor compliance of states with treaty obligations, and financial assistance to support the realisation of the right could be a part of the solution. As to the

latter problem, we are hopeful that development of a tool to assist with monitoring the realisation of young children's rights and identifying and understanding the areas in which progress has been made, could be very helpful in an environment of good faith. We have undertaken several initiatives that strive to test these propositions.

As one of the leading international NGOs that has helped develop GC7 and has worked towards implementation of the UNCRC for young children, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, in close cooperation with Committee, led a study to answer some of these questions. Their aim was to evaluate how GC7 would be received by State Parties and how General Comments have been interpreted since 2005. One of the main components of the study was consideration of early childhood indicators based on GC7 in Jamaica, the pilot site for the study.

During the course of the study, the Committee requested a group of researchers, the WHO, UNICEF, and child rights advocates from several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to elaborate on a framework of indicators based on this pilot study. As a result, the Early Childhood Rights Indicators Group<sup>5</sup> (herein the Group or GC7 Indicators Group) was formed. The Group sought to address the issues by creating a monitoring tool comprised of sets of indicators that State Parties could use to assess the rights environment and the implementation

of rights in early childhood in their countries as part of their reporting. This framework, completed in May 2008, addresses specific rights that are upheld in the UNCRC and elaborated in GC7. It also addresses the following underlying and cross-cutting themes:

- the need to recognise young children as rights holders and active social participants,
- State Parties obligations to provide appropriate and adequate support for caregivers of young children,
- the need for integrated service provision in support of holistic approaches to child development,
- the need to support and empower the evolving capacities of young children,
- empowering and positive education, preschool, and play experiences,
- freedom from social exclusion by virtue of young age, gender, race, disability etc,
- freedom from violence and understanding of the particular vulnerability of young children.

#### **Organisational framework of the indicators**

The indicator framework includes 15 sets of indicators that are based on existing UNICEF and health indicators; but also proposes new configurations of administrative data that could be used to gauge the implementation and enjoyment of rights in early childhood. These indicators are arranged within a hybrid model that combines elements from the structure of the UNCRC

reporting guidelines, the format of UNICEF's Multiple Information Cluster Surveys and the structure of the WHO Right to Health framework.

The indicator sets proposed in the framework are organised according to the clusters of the Committee's reporting guidelines (Committee on the Rights of the Child 1994). Under each cluster heading there is a rationale for the indicator sets that provides appropriate references to relevant articles in the CRC and paragraphs of GC7. An overarching key question is also given in each rationale that provides the foundation for the indicator. Following rationale statements, there is a table in which each foundation question is unpacked into sets of questions that are divided into sections titled: Structure, Process and Outcomes. Structure, as an indication of commitment to take action, refers to the existence of institutions and policies aligned with the UNCRC and the realisation of the particular rights in question. Process refers generally to efforts made and actions taken following on from commitment, and thus to specific activities, resources and/or initiatives in pursuit of rights realisation. Outcome refers to a resultant and measurable change either in the 'rights environment' or directly in early childhood development measures. Within these tables, we also identify potential sources of information and propose one or two measures, which may be the most effective and



parsimonious means to describe the specific achievement with regard to the rights under consideration. Within each table we also delineate the relevant Duty Bearers and provide references to sections of the Reporting Guidelines. The GC7 Indicators Framework was finalised early 2008 and presented to the Committee. The Committee was pleased with the work done and the developed indicators and encouraged the group to pilot test them in a few countries. Over the last year the Early Childhood Indicators Group has worked on developing an implementation manual for these indicators (Vaghri et al. 2009). Information on the implementation manual is given below. The group has also identified six countries; two from each income level (low, medium and high income), to pilot the manual and will be embarking on the first pilot in Tanzania in the autumn of 2009.

#### **The Manual of Early Childhood Rights Indicators**

The implementation manual is an easy to follow and user-friendly guide that will help the States Parties

to assess whether the rights of their children are being upheld. It promotes better data collection, more careful analysis of data, more complete monitoring and, as a result, much more comprehensive reporting of early childhood rights. In short it is not only a tool for governments to fulfil their obligation for periodic reporting to the Committee in a very descriptive and thorough manner, it is also an efficient institutional self-assessment tool and an inventory check list for them to become aware of what is already there and what is not but needs to be, in terms of policies and programmes, to facilitate the realisation of the UNCRC.

The manual is written in a concise, clear, and understandable way. It includes examples and checklists for each set of indicators; employs rights-language; shares knowledge, practice and coverage; and provides examples of written policies in the form of policy papers.

The manual is based on the Committee's structured reporting guideline that delineates eight clusters under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).<sup>6</sup>

The focal point of each indicator set in the manual is a flow chart that walks the report writer(s) through a series of questions about existing policies and programmes. Then it moves on to ask whether or not these have resulted in any outcomes. These can be any change in the environment of a particular right or in the state of early child development, as measured by valid indicators. In cases where the country's answer to a given policy/programme question is negative the flow chart provides examples of model policies/programmes from countries across the globe. A conscious attempt has been made to include as many examples from resource poor countries as possible. These examples are often followed by website addresses or additional information. These examples and additional information are meant to serve as a strong starting point for governments in their journey to fill in existing gaps in their systems.

## Conclusion

Early childhood is a critical stage of growth and development that has the potential to influence an individual's health, education and economic potential throughout life. However, although State Parties are aware of the importance of early childhood, they often overlook their obligations during the early years largely because of the perceived invisibility of very young children and their families. The UNCRRC clearly recognises this and outlines the elements in children's immediate

as well as distant environments that are conducive to the full achievement of their developmental potential. Despite the existence of strong and clear guidelines, the task of monitoring UNCRRC implementation in early childhood has remained a challenge, in part due to a lack of monitoring tools. With the advent of GC7 and the GC7 Indicator Framework, rights in early childhood no longer need to remain a mystery or invisible. The GC7 Indicators Group has developed a comprehensive series of guidelines and indicators through which the enjoyment of rights and the rights environment of the world's youngest and most vulnerable citizens can be understood and monitored. Field-testing the Framework is an essential step toward building an internationally recognised child rights monitoring tool. It is our belief that upon pilot testing, the global deployment of such a tool will result in building efficient child rights monitoring systems in countries across the world.

## Notes

- 1 UNCRRC Articles 43–45.
- 2 Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2005). General Comment 7: Implementing Rights in Early Childhood, para 4.
- 3 Adaptation of the "monitoring" definition of the University of Minnesota, Human Rights Library at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/monitoring/chapter1.html#D2> (accessed on 25.8.2009)
- 4 All general comments can be found at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/comments.htm>
- 5 Members are: Adem Arkadas, International Children's Centre (ICC), Ankara; Caroline Arnold, Aga Khan Foundation, Geneva; Clyde Hertzman, Emily Hertzman, Lori G Irwin and Ziba Vaghri, Human Early Learning Partnership, Vancouver;

Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague; Alan Kikuchi-White, sos Kinderdorp International, Geneva; Lothar Krappmann, Committee Member UNCRRC, Geneva; Nurper Ulkuer, UNICEF, New York; Mary Young, The World Bank; Louise Zimanyi, The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, Toronto

6 Overview of the reporting procedures CRC/C/33 adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child at its seventh session on 24 October 1994.

## References

- Chapman, A.R. (1993). *Exploring a Human Rights Approach to Health Care Reform*. Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science.
- Child Right Information Network (CRIN). 2009. The use of concluding observation for monitoring the implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. *c/o Save the Children UK*. Geneva, Switzerland.
- Irwin, L., Siddiqi, A. and Hertzman, C. (2007). *Early Child Development; a Powerful Equalizer*. The final report submitted to the World Health Organisation. Available at: [http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/globalknowledgehub/documents/who\\_ECD\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/globalknowledgehub/documents/who_ECD_Final_Report.pdf)
- Palmer, A., Tomkinson, J., Phung, C., Ford, N., Joffe, M., Fernandes, K., Zeng, L., Lima, V., Montaner, J., Guyatt, G. and Mills E. (2009). *Does ratification of human rights treaties have effects on population health? The Lancet* 373(6)P: 1987–92.
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (1994). *Overview of the reporting procedures, basic reference document number CRC/C/33, Paragraph 5*. [http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/CRC.C.33.En?Opendocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/CRC.C.33.En?Opendocument)
- Vaghri Z., Arkadas, A. et al. (2009). *Manual on Implementing Early Childhood Rights Indicators Framework*.