An Assessment of the Impact of Youth Submissions to the
United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

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Introduction

Until 1998, when two reports were submitted reflecting the voices of children and young people in the more direct form of statements by under-eigh teen s, NGO submissions to the Committee on the Rights of the Child tended to be based on the comments and views of concerned adults. Although several NGO reports professed to represent the concerns of children, these voices reached the UNCRC Committee in a muted form through the veil of adult perception.

While young people were on occasion included in the NGO delegations to Geneva, session 23 signalled a tentative break with the tradition of indirect reporting of young people’s views. Rather than just presenting their own analysis of the situation, two Indian NGO coalitions assumed the role of facilitator enabling young people to make their voice heard. One of these reports (NMWC, 1998) was based on statements by working children between seven and fourteen and collected and compiled by older members from these groups, the other described as ‘complementary to the Alternate Report by the Working Group on the Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (Butterflies, 1998), presented the results of a poster-questionnaire distributed to 125,000 children. Although several other NGO submissions, such as the Zambian and Jamaican NGO reports include a number of statements made by children, the submissions considered here have been created by groups of young people themselves, or contain substantial contributions from children.

Several of the authors of the youth reports were able to attend the pre-sessional hearings and put their points of view to the Committee. This practice represents a major change from the time when reporting to the UN CRC Committee was an exclusively adult activity which did not involve young people to any significant degree.

In recent years youth delegates have been able to discuss their concerns with the members of the Committee in an official pre-sessional meeting, as well as more informally. Two reports, available on the Internet (Article 12, 2002; Zandvliet, 2004), describe the hearings and give us some idea of the informal discussions. However, they do not tell us, how satisfied the youth delegates were with the outcome of the process. Some young people have
indicated they were convinced that specific recommendations were made in response to their arguments, but others were less forthcoming.

This paper examines to what extent submissions by children and young people can be seen to make a difference. The main question is, whether the subjects the Committee has identified as key issues are the same as the ones considered important by the young people.

The youth reports

Young people’s concerns have been expressed in different ways: sometimes the reports take the form of structured essays, on other occasions they consist of discrete statements or requests for change as well as practical suggestions. Several submissions are intensely personal, such as five essays written by Japanese children, which can only be read as a plea for help. A number of contributions, such as the Indian Working Children’s report include comments on the State Party report, and are presented in accordance with a clear-cut framework, covering, in their own words:

- Our present situation in the context of the realisation of our rights with regard to our Protection, the Provision of services and infrastructure and our right to Participation.
- Our own initiatives that have helped us to improve our lives and to realise our rights.
- Our suggestions for what needs to be done for the realisation of our Rights. (NMWC, 2003: 4)

Although the areas of concern of the young people cover the whole range of issues identified by the Committee, this paper concentrates on statements that appear either to have given rise to Recommendations from the Committee or on concerns raised in several children’s submissions which have not been given any attention. In addition a number of memorable phrases, relating to issues high on the agenda of most NGOs, are quoted because of the force of conviction and graphical detail depicting the speakers’ plight.

The reports: i) are based on surveys conducted among children and compiled and edited by adults, ii) present unedited statements made by children and young people, arranged in a logical sequence by young people in their teens or adults, or iii) are arranged and edited by fourteen to eighteen-year olds on the basis of questionnaires or surveys, conducted by children and young people. In some cases the young people’s ages are given, whilst name, age and gender of the child speakers have been left out in other youth reports.

Since 1998 fourteen further reports, presenting statements by children and young people, have been submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the