The UK Agenda for Children contains some of the best in advocacy for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and, ironically, it also contains some of the worst. Because the book comprehensively analyses the extent to which the government has carried out its responsibilities under the CRC, and for its many concrete recommendations to correct the deficiencies, the UK Agenda is essential reading in the United Kingdom.

For those outside the UK, the book is an important model because its methodologies can be applied by CRC advocates in any country, regardless of what scale or scope they are operating on. But it is also a model of what not to do: the tendencies to interpret the CRC carelessly, and, worst yet, to let ideological agendas distort the Convention beyond recognition, are lessons of what advocates must avoid if they are to maintain credibility.

The Children’s Rights Development Unit, a small, private organization, worked from 1992 to 1994 creating a network of hundreds of organizations and individuals, both adults and minors. Together they conducted a detailed examination of life in the UK from the point of view of minors and their rights. The book that resulted, the UK Agenda for Children, is in one sense a citizens’ counterpart to the implementation report that the UK government gave to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The book is like a guided tour of the UK, pointing out problems that young people are undergoing, commenting on the government’s policies for addressing these problems using the CRC as a framework, and making recommendations for how the government can bring itself into compliance with the Convention.

The UK Agenda is more than a report, however. It is part of a larger process of changing UK society such that one day minors will be treated as citizens whose human rights are fully respected – socially, legally, and politically.

Analyzing the application of the entire CRC to the lives of 13 million minors in the four jurisdictions which make up the UK – England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland – would have been overwhelming had the task not been built on two conceptual pillars. The first pillar is to view everything through three separate lenses: practice, law and policy.

Under the practice lens, the authors report the results of an investigation, they are answering the question: What is happening in the lives of young people in the UK? From government reports, academic research, discussion groups of adolescents and children, and many other sources, the authors have collected an enormous amount of
facts about the ill-being and well-being of UK youth. In the education chapter, we learn that 40% of secondary schools are substandard in health and safety. Opening to a page in the juvenile justice chapter, we read “the United Kingdom lock[s] up a vastly greater proportion of young people than virtually any other state in Europe”. In the report on care facilities, we are informed that “day care is available for 2% of under-three as compared with 30% in France and 48% in Denmark”. The chapter on living standards reveals the shocking fact that the health of UK kids has actually deteriorated during the last twenty years. Equally distressing is that since 1979 “the poorest 10% of the population suffered a real drop of 14% in their living standards at a time when average incomes went up by 36% and top incomes by 62% after housing costs”.

In addition to these chapters, there are reports on personal freedoms, physical integrity, health, environment, play, labor, violence in Northern Ireland, abduction, and international obligations. The facts brought into view under the practice lens are documented by hundreds of citations. Judging by the titles of these reference works, many should be of value outside the UK, for example, “Caring for prisoners at risk of suicide and self-injury”, and “The competency of children and adolescents to make informed treatment decisions”.

Under the law lens the authors analyze whether the practices are in conformity with existing UK legislation. The refrain, “paper rights ... are not respected in practice”, reverberates through the book like a drum beat.

The law lens also analyzes whether existing legislation and current practices comply with the CRC. As to the Children’s Act of 1989, the single most important piece of UK legislation regarding kids, the authors conclude that “much of it reflects (and in some cases even exceeds) principles and standards of the Convention”. But while the Act is “a major and welcome reform”, it is defective because “many aspects of most children’s lives” are not covered by legal standards. Not only are there disparities in legal protection between different sectors of life, there are discrepancies between which minors receive protection because the Act only applies to England and Wales.

Once a discrepancy between practice and law has been uncovered, the policy lens is used to fashion a recommended solution. The authors usually spend six or seven short paragraphs in a practice-law-policy discussion, and then conclude with a paragraph on “Action required for [CRC] compliance”. For example, the book describes the failures of various attempts to ensure that the interests and views of kids are considered during their parents’ divorce cases. Under the Action section, the authors propose that minors “be entitled to automatic party status” and “to separate legal representation”, at State expense when necessary.

Many times the policy lens leads to recommendations for legislative action, either in the repeal or amendment of existing statutes or in the enactment of new laws. Other times the proposals are to carry out research so the government will have better information upon which to make sound choices. In some cases, the proposed action is educational, for the government to teach public servants better skills and attitudes, or to do the same for the general public. Soliciting the views of young people during the planning, implementation and review of programs is another frequent suggestion. The most common recommendation, however, is for the government to spend more money on kids.

The Children’s Rights Development Unit believes that the realization of rights is a political matter, and they use the practice-law-policy approach to build the case that reform is needed and to advocate for their proposals. Once the policy debate