

Rights in real life

HOW THE UNCRC HAS IMPROVED
THE SITUATION FOR CHILDREN



Save the Children
Sweden

The vision

Save the Children works for:

- a world which respects and values each child*
- a world which listens to children and learns*
- a world where all children have hope and opportunity*

The mission

Save the Children fights for children's rights.

We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

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CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

On 20 November 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention outlines the rights and responsibilities of every child and young person under the age of 18. The UNCRC is today most ratified human rights instrument in the world.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the UNCRC. On this occasion, we take a look at how working with the UNCRC has helped Save the Children Sweden secure rights for millions of children around the world.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) forms the basis of all Save the Children Sweden's work around the world. Since the inception of the Convention, its four main principles have become the underlying and unifying thread among all our efforts in securing children's rights.

This means that our work must enable all children to enjoy their rights without exception; children shall be consulted and supported to participate in decision making on matters that concern them; all actions concerning children must be based on their best interests; and all children have the right to life, survival and development.

Following the UNCRC, we believe that the States that have signed the Convention are ultimately responsible for the implementation of the UNCRC and cannot ignore this responsibility.

Until the Convention was adopted in 1989, our work was based on what was perceived to be the best and the basic needs of the communities including children. The communities, let alone the children, were rarely consulted regarding what they might find to be their priorities and concerns. Until the Convention was understood and implemented, children were seen as appendices of adults. Working with the Convention has paved the way for children to be understood as pro-active subjects of human rights and no longer mere objects of concern.

In the last 20 years we have learnt to watch the world from a child's point of view and to listen to what children have to say about problems and possible solutions. Here we present a compilation of short stories from around the world, that reveal what can be achieved when an organization works from a human rights perspective for and with children.

DISABLED INFANTS GET A NEW LEASE OF LIFE IN TOGO

Working with a child rights focus means recognising the diversity among children. Our work must address girls and boys of different age groups, in and out of school, separated children or those in violent situations, exploited children and so on. Over the years, we reached out to various groups of children. Values of non-discrimination and inclusion are at the core of all our actions and efforts.

For centuries, the Konkomba community in Togo nurtured a lethal secret. A Konkomba baby, born disabled was not allowed to survive beyond the first month of its life. The disabled infant was said to secretly disappear in the night, carried off by the spirits. In reality, an infanticide took place with the consent of the parents.

Infanticide was considered an acceptable tradition even by intellectuals in the community. The tradition stems from ancient times when the community was well known for its warrior skills. A mentally and/or physically impaired child would not seem to fit that perceived role.

Although the UNCRC was ratified by the Togolese government in 1990, challenging the tradition was uncomfortable to many. In 2005, a group of non governmental organisations including World Association for Orphans (a local partner of Save the Children Sweden in Togo), UNICEF and the Togolese parliamentarians decided to take action. The campaign targeted students, community leaders and parents. The message was based on the UNCRC and its principles of non-discrimination, the right to survival, education and health for all including infants with disabilities. Examples were given from the neighbouring Benin where the same custom exists but where malformed babies had been secretly brought up. When these children had received schooling they returned to the village displaying their capabilities to the community.

At first, Konkomba paid little heed to the lecturing but the idea was anchored among the intellectuals and politicians. They persisted in bringing up the issue with students. However, for a few traditional chiefs this practice had become a source of income, hence they were reluctant to accept an argument against it. The involved organisations also looked for ways to provide financial means to the families, to help them support their disabled children, providing them with incentive to end this practice.

The local campaign has now spread to higher levels of the government. In 2007, the National Child Protection Policy successfully incorporated this issue. Moreover, the campaign has helped raise interest and awareness in understanding the UNCRC, both among the higher levels of power and among the grassroots.

AFGHAN GIRLS DESIRE EDUCATION

About 800 girls attend the Bar Behar School for Girls, located in the Khogyani district in Afghanistan.

Situated below Spin Gar Mountains, the area is well known for the caves where Osama Bin Laden and his men hid, during the fall of the Taleban in Afghanistan. This is a remote area with a highly conservative community. Here, Save the Children Sweden Norway works with four government schools, supporting quality education and learning.

During a school programme in 2006, in front of community elders and officials, the girl students reiterated their need for knowledge. They asked for their right to education on equal terms with boys. The girls also mentioned how difficult it was to study without a shelter over their head. This frank expression was greatly appreciated by the community elders.

Impressed by the girls' desire for education, a community member along with the head of the Parent-Teachers-Students Association decided to donate 60 square yards of land to Save the Children to build a proper school for the girls.

Since the organisation is not involved in construction of schools; it lobbied with UNICEF Afghanistan to support this work. In a meeting with UNICEF, Save the Children presented a letter from the Bar Behar elders, requesting for the construction of a school building. The community promised to provide labour and materials equal to 30 per cent of the cost of the building. UNICEF agreed to undertake this work.

In August 2007, a new school for girls was inaugurated in the community. While classes up to grade 9 take place in the morning, in the afternoon it converts into a school for learning the Koran. The Parent-Teacher-Student Association provides computer lessons and winter courses for the girls. The school also boasts of a well and latrines. The construction of the boundary wall and the school gates were provided by a community member. The girls' desire for a proper school came true. They now wait to for female teachers in their school.

Children's right to education is at the fore-front of our work. We strive for free, easily accessed quality education in safe, non-violent schools for all children. Children's and their families' influence and participation in the curriculum and school management is an important aspect of our work. A child rights focus to education requires us to think and work along these lines.



Girls at Bar Behar School attending a school programme with community elders. During this event, the girls demand their right to education in one of the most conservative areas in Afghanistan.



Community elders and officials at Bar Behar School, trying to support the demands made by the girl students.

CHILDREN IN LATIN AMERICA ANALYSE PUBLIC BUDGETS

“It is important for us to know what is being done with our money. Something is taken every time you buy something with the excuse that it is to invest in the State. And now I am going to know whether the money is being used well or not... We have an idea of what happens with this money and what is to be done with it,” says Michele, a young person from Fortaleza, a town in northern Brazil.

In Fortaleza, children come together each year to take part in a debate on their municipality’s budget distribution. Supported by Save the Children Sweden and their partners, children are trained to understand nuances of public expenditure and spending. These children, who often come from marginalised backgrounds, are taken for a visit around town, to learn first hand about how the government spends its money. Children take pictures and compare public investment in equipments and infrastructure in several neighbourhoods. An explanation of the public budget follows the visit, based on the examples observed by the children. This experience helps children to present alternative proposals for specific projects that they consider could help in improving their lives. Moreover children also learn to lobby with local authorities and inform the media of their findings and suggestions.

“What struck me the most during the analysis was the class difference. Whilst in certain places we found a perfectly legal structure, in other places almost everything was lacking. For me, the right to shelter is the right most violated... we saw, for example, entire families living under cardboard...”, says Valdeci Carvalho, a 18 year old.

As a result of these efforts, in the municipal assembly of 2003, children proposed 33 amendments to the budget, of which three proposals were approved for the Public Budget of 2004. In the municipal assembly of 2004, nine amendments to the Public Budget of 2005 were approved.

Based on this successful experience, today several child led organisations in Brazil and in other countries in Latin America such as Peru and Nicaragua have begun to support children to analyze and suggest changes in public budgets. Many public authorities have welcomed this initiative as a step towards participatory and transparent public governance at the local level. This experience also allows children to claim their space in a democratic society as active citizens.

Following this experience, representatives of child led organisations from Latin America were invited to speak at the Day of General Discussion before the CRC Committee in 2007. The special topic for this day was ‘Resources for the Rights of the Child’. Here, children presented their experience in participating in the elaboration of local public budgets and budget tracking, and the impact and benefits that arise from it. Impressed with their experience, the CRC Committee took due note of their suggestions when writing its recommendations to the States following the discussion.



Public demonstration of the children in Fortaleza.
Photo by CEDECA

Experience reveals that unless laws, legislation and policies are backed by financial commitments, they go no further.

Through the public budget the government can show how, by allocation of resources, it is transforming its commitment to children’s rights into reality.

Working with the UNCRC, we ensure that government sets aside the funds for the provisions of the Convention, and also that children and young people have a voice in decision making and are acknowledged as active citizens in their communities.

Following the UNCRC, we support civil society organisations to be independent and sustainable by strengthening their capacities on planning, management, fundraising, finance, and facilitation skills. Our goal is a strong civil society for the rights of the child, where boys and girls, parents or caregivers claim the rights of the child.



Thien Ly, 10, colours a drawing book. Her mother frequents the School for Hearing Impaired Children, to learn about children's rights and parenting methods for children with disabilities.

Photo by Jack Picone



Together, parents and children with disabilities learn to communicate with one another using sign language. The parents club helps inexperienced parents to learn different parenting methods.

Photo by Jack Picone

VIETNAMESE PARENTS LEARNING TO RAISE CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN A BETTER WAY

Ever since Thien Ly, 10, began showing learning disabilities at an early age, her mother began keeping her inside their home.

"I knew she was different from other kids, but I didn't know what was wrong with her. After I met teachers at the School for Hearing Impaired Children, I understood my daughter's conditions and I learned ways to raise my daughter. I started to take her outside and let her meet people. I started teaching her to help herself," says Thai Kim Huong, Thien Ly's mother.

More than 35 years after the US sprayed a toxic defoliant known as Agent Orange on farmlands and forests in Viet Nam, babies are being born with defects and various forms of disabilities.

Striving to earn equal rights for their disabled children and improve the quality of their children's lives, teachers and parents of children with disabilities at the School for Hearing Impaired Children in southern Viet Nam have formed a parents' club to exchange and develop effective parenting skills.

Although Viet Nam has seen an increasing number of parents' clubs and other civil society organisations at community, district, and provincial levels, such organisations or groups are not acknowledged by the government and have been operating without any legal recognition. However in December 2007, the Association of Education and Psychology of Dong Thap Province committed to legalise the parents' club.

"The fact that the parent's club in Dong Thap is in the process of becoming a legal and independent organisation signals an evolving and enabling environment for civil society, which you could not think of 7 to 10 years ago. This could be an indicator of its growing maturity and confidence in the club's development and management," says Save the Children Sweden's programme officer for civil society support and good governance.

Save the Children Sweden facilitates the club's participation with other like-minded civil society organisations in the southern provinces to promote learning and exchanges of good practices. It supports the club by providing relevant information and updates on children's rights.

Adapted from: http://seap.savethechildren.se/en/South_East_Asia/Latest/Thailand-Disaster-risk-reduction-education-to-go-national/



Daniel at home in Southern Sudan.

Sudan has ratified the UNCRC and has also signed the Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. The protocol sets 18 as the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities, for recruitment into armed groups, and for compulsory recruitment by governments. However tens of thousands of children under the age of 18 are currently participating in armed conflicts in Sudan and around the world. These children are not only active combatants, but also porters, cooks, spies, minesweepers and sex slaves. Regardless of whether they are in combat roles or play a supporting role, Save the Children believes that children should not be used in armed conflict under any circumstances. Following the UNCRC, we are committed to helping these children return to their families and communities and to preventing further underage recruitment by any military or armed group. Save the Children helps communities understand and cope with children who are returning from combat.



Daniel's family prepares for his travel to Uganda for schooling.

CHILD SOLDIERS IN SUDAN FIND THEIR WAY BACK HOME

Daniel Lat has been reunited with his family after one year. It has been a difficult journey for him. Daniel was recruited into Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in 2007. Today he is one of over 1,500 child soldiers that have been rescued from the conflict in Sudan.

Sudan's bitter civil war has had many casualties. This includes children who have spent their growing up serving in the army. Boys as young as ten are known to have joined the army. Many of them, who lost their parents in the fighting, joined the army because they had nowhere else to go.

Since 1998, Save the Children Sweden has been working with SPLA to demobilise children from the army. After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the SPLA in 2005 was signed, a Commission was appointed whose mandate was to demobilise children, among other duties. Demobilisation of child soldiers involves identification, registration, family tracing, reunification, and follow-up. The Southern Sudan Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission is charged with the responsibility of demobilising children from the army while Save the Children Sweden carries out the family tracing, reunification and follow up.

In 2008, the Commission contacted Save the Children Sweden with information about Daniel and 16 other child soldiers, demobilised from the barracks, waiting to be reunited with their families. Together with the Ministry of Social Development, Save the Children successfully traced the boys' families, using information about their local village chiefs and villages. Save the Children Sweden, has now developed a module on Family Tracing and Reunification which is being used by various agencies to reunite child soldiers in Southern Sudan. The organisation also provides counselling and support for social reintegration of the demobilised child soldiers through its Youth Education Centres.

Today Daniel goes to school in Uganda. When Save the Children Sweden visited him last, he seemed to be coping well with his family, teachers and school mates. "I aspire to be a doctor if all goes well. I only worry about the ability of my parents to pay for my secondary and university education," says Daniel.

"While disarmament and demobilisation of children continues to gain momentum in Southern Sudan, less attention and funds are being given to reintegration," notes Save the Children Sweden's field staff. "This is leading to children getting re-recruited," they add. The 'push factor' of lack of opportunities in children's civilian lives, combined with the 'pull factor' of a salary in the army, is leading children to voluntarily seek to (re)join the SPLA and associated armed groups.

CHILDREN IN MOLDOVA GAUGE RESPECT FOR THEIR RIGHTS

“The most discriminated ones are children from poor families, or children with disabilities... the way they look, the way they dress... other children mock them, they are not accepted in the group, they are isolated”.

“Punishment will not have a positive impact on me, on the contrary, I will be afraid and I will not become more responsible”.

“The child spends most of his time at school. Most of the rights are indeed violated within school, and among the most violated rights is the freedom of expression”.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is responsible for monitoring the compliance of the UNCRC by various governments. Save the Children Sweden gives priority to the complementary (alternative or shadow) reports that are submitted by the civil society to the Committee. These reports are submitted in addition to the government reports and are encouraged to show the reality of children's rights in a country. It is a way of making state parties accountable for their policies in view of the situation and evolution of children's rights.

Save the Children Sweden takes an active part in bringing together child oriented non governmental organisation's to monitor the government reports and to collect facts and figures in a systematic way. Among many country programmes, there is now an increased interest in involving children in monitoring the progress in children's rights.

Many such children's thoughts now inform the Moldova's complementary report on the Status of the Children, submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2008. Supporting the complementary report is children's own report to the Committee, written and developed by them, presented by the children at the pre-session with the Committee.

Fifteen years after Moldova ratified the UNCRC, the first ever Children's Working Group on the Monitoring of the Convention on the Rights of the Child launched an initiative to collect information about children's rights in Moldova. This collection of children's voices and expression is part of a special project undertaken by Save the Children Sweden's partner Child Rights Information Centre Moldova (CRIC). During this two year project, 26 children, aged between 11 to 15 years, chosen democratically, will monitor the implementation of the UNCRC and other relevant national legislations in Moldova. To this end, a series of workshops and consultations have been organised.

Children have been provided trainings on UNCRC and the national legislation, including the national child protection system. Workshops have been held on specific issues such as the right to survival, development, participation, and on specific rights such as the right to education, protection from violence and neglect, juvenile justice, discrimination, family environment, parents' migration and so on. Together with the children, a system of monitoring, adapted to children needs and interests, has been developed. Children have learnt how to collect stories and develop indicators to monitor their rights.

Within this process children have also had the opportunity to meet community leaders and raise public awareness on different issues. Children's views have been widely circulated as publications, to familiarise and motivate other children to be involved in monitoring of children's rights. The idea is to also involve parents, caregivers, teachers, decision makers and other professionals to consult with children, to understand what children think of present social services and to take into account children's opinions when developing policies and legislation. Now the Children's Working Group will also contribute to CRIC's advocacy efforts at the national and local level. This process has highlighted the need for a platform where children can be consulted on their rights on a permanent and systematic basis. Among many recommendations offered by the children, regarding the monitoring of the UNCRC in Moldova, they say, “Create youth groups who will submit to the state the opinions and suggestions gathered from children, and who will be responsible for the monitoring of the situation of the rights of the child at a national level, namely what is done in order to ensure the respect and the implementation of the child's rights included in the Convention in our country”.

A BANGLADESHI BOY LEAVES DRUG PEDDLING, GOES TO SCHOOL

Suleiman was 5 years old, when he began working as a waste collector, in a slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh. His mother worked as a domestic helper and his brother as a van puller. The income was scanty. It wasn't long before Suleiman attracted the attention of the local drug peddlers, who pulled him into the drug business. Suleiman began carrying, selling and storing drugs. He did this to earn more money and also to save himself from harassment from the drug lords.

Suleiman was 14 when he first heard about Child Brigade, a local non governmental organisation, supported by Save the Children Sweden Denmark in Bangladesh. Motivated by his brother, Suleiman joined the organisation. He learnt about the rights of the children and how he could take an active part in changing his own life. He soon decided to leave the drug business. This irritated the drug peddlers who pressured him to come back. His family didn't agree with his decision, either, as he did not make as much money while at Child Brigade. But Suleiman was determined to change his life.

With support from the NGO, he continued to be actively involved in Child Brigade's activities. Today, Suleiman works part time as a helper in a garage, learning how to fix cars. For the first time in his life, he is also going to school, a desire he has long nurtured. He takes part in Child Brigade's community dramas, highlighting the change in the lives of children like him. Along with his two friends at Child Brigade, he now runs a literacy class and provides medical support to children in his slum.

The UNCRC strongly states that children shall not be exploited neither by work nor in any other way. It also states that children have a right to education. The CRC does not however condemn child work as such. This is because we know that millions of children do not have a choice whether to work or not, but are bound to work for survival. Some children work in order to be able to pay the school outfit and books and many children take a pride in helping out the family economically and learn a craft.

Following the UNCRC, we support children that work and their organisations around the world. We defend their right not to be exploited, support them to negotiate working conditions and create opportunities for them to go to school.

CHILDREN IN THAILAND LEARN HOW KEEP THEMSELVES SAFE DURING DISASTERS

“I am proud of myself. I never thought I would be able to make a Risk & Resource map but I did. I am happy that we are being taught not to panic in a disaster,” says Archa, 12. Sead, 11, adds “We’ve learned how to prepare for a disaster and find an evacuation route.”

These are the voices of children studying in a tsunami-affected school, in one of Thailand’s coastal provinces. Archa and Sead’s school was situated 200 meters from the coastline and was struck by the large waves, resulting in the death of eight children and one teacher. They were rehearsing a performance for an upcoming New Year celebration when they heard a roar as the tsunami struck.

Since 2005, Save the Children Sweden and its partners have been working in tsunami-affected areas to make schools and communities a safe place for children. Children are the main actors in all the disaster risk reduction activities. The activity ranges from learning about different types of disasters to promoting disaster preparedness in schools and communities.

Nu-Tar, 12, says “We had a lot of fun and I learned many new things. The good thing is that other people will learn about disaster risk reduction and it teaches the teachers as well. I have made a book, drawn Risk and Resource maps, and did puppet shows. I would like to see my book published in English one day,” she said.

Save the Children Sweden is now lobbying to make Child-Led Disaster Risk Reduction, part of the school curriculum in Southern Thailand. The curriculum has been developed together with the Department of Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education, partner organisations, Plan and Action Aid. It will be introduced to tsunami affected schools this year and very soon to other parts of Thailand.

The curriculum is designed for students in grades 4 to 6 with the objective to empower students to apply local knowledge to solve problems in their daily lives.

Pla, a non governmental organisation staff member, who has trained more than 100 students in six schools, says “The Child-Led Disaster Risk Reduction project is unique because the children are driving it. Normally the process of incorporating something into the curriculum starts from the top and works its way down to the bottom. This time it is starting from the bottom (at primary school level) and is going to the top (Ministry of Education).”

Traditional centralised approaches of disaster risk management fall short of meeting the needs of communities, often overlooking local capacities, resources and needs. Save the Children works to empower those most at risk within vulnerable communities — the children.

Following a child rights focus, Save the Children believes that children can lead a process of risk reduction. With adequate support, children can be the agents of change leading the process through inception to completion. Children have the capacity to contribute, by bringing a unique perspective to Disaster Risk Reduction preparations and have the right to play a part in making themselves and their communities safer.



Students cross check a community map that they have developed. The map shows both risk areas and safe areas that members of the community can clearly distinguish in the event of a disaster.

Photo/story by Jack Picone.

IN YEMEN, CHILDREN TAKE ACTION TO MAKE POLICE DETENTIONS A SAFE PLACE

A child rights approach to end violence against children implies working with long term goals, encouraging legal and other reforms.

Working with the UNCRRC, Save the Children identify the most relevant actors and advocate and support them in their role to protect children and prevent violence against them.

We also work with government and local bodies to establish ways of monitoring the progress, to achieve sustainable change.

Save the Children works with partners in Yemen to push for legal compliance with the UNCRRC. An example is our support to the Aden Juvenile Centre and their work on national sensitisation of police officials. During workshops for police officials children from the Rehabilitation Centre in Aden had the courage to face the policemen who had tortured and abused them, and say exactly what had happened to them. The policemen's superiors attended the workshops and subsequently took action against the perpetrators. As a result of this, girls and boys are no longer detained in Aden police stations but are sent on remand directly to Rehabilitation Centres.

"These children are malnourished, beaten and some of them are even sexually exploited. They are held without trial and often for petty crimes," criticised the judge in charge of the juvenile court cases in Aden, Yemen. These cases have come to light in other parts of Yemen as well, confirms the head of the Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre in Aden.

But 18 years after Yemen's ratification of the UNCRRC, juvenile offenders are still denied their basic rights in Yemen. According to Yemeni law, children are treated as juvenile offenders only until the age of 15. This issue has also been raised by the Child Parliament in Yemen, who have called upon the government to make 18 the legal age for children to be treated the same as adult offenders. The government is yet to approve this proposal.

Save the Children has supported the Children's Parliament of Yemen for many years. Members of this Parliament continue to raise this issue in their recurring high level meetings. The first complementary report, written by the Children's Parliament on the state of children in Yemen during 2008, made the Committee of the Rights of the Child strongly raise the issue of children convicted of crimes and being held with adults in adult prisons.

(Adapted from Children's Actions to end Violence against Girls and Boys, A Contribution to the United Nations Study on Violence against Children, Save the Children, 2005)

ALL CHILDREN IN SWEDEN ARE NOW PROTECTED FROM EARLY MARRIAGE

Equity and non-discrimination are fundamental principles of the UNCRC. Through Save the Children's various programmes and interventions across the world, we address various forms of discrimination (for example gender, age, ability, sexual preference, HIV/AIDS status, religion, ethnicity, caste and so on), factoring in both immediate and underlying causes, such as unequal power relations and patriarchal structures.

We take action so that children's right to non-discrimination and inclusion is protected by the Constitution, laws and policies, and that these laws and policies are implemented and closely monitored. We support a bottoms-up approach to address values, attitudes and practices that perpetuate and reinforce discrimination and inequalities in a community.

Until May 2004, the marriageable age of girls and boys living in Sweden, but not Swedish citizens, was dependent upon legislation in their country of origin.

As the minimum age for marriage in some countries is lower than 18 years, a child living in Sweden could marry before the age of 18 without a special permission. However, no one could get married before the age of 15 without a special permission. Furthermore, early marriages that had taken place outside Sweden could be recognised in Sweden.

In 1999, this issue was strongly raised in the Concluding Observations by the CRC Committee. The Committee concluded that Sweden should consider changes in its legislation to improve the protection of children against the negative consequences of early marriage and eliminate the discrimination of children within their jurisdiction.

Based on this, Save the Children Sweden began advocating for a change in legislation. It highlighted that the legislation was discriminatory and should be consistent for all children in Sweden.

Save the Children Sweden contacted parliamentarians and other opinion builders to put pressure on the government to change the law. The issue was raised in parliamentary debates and other forums. Save the Children Sweden also lobbied strategically with the Ministry for Justice Affairs. These advocacy efforts were based on the Concluding Observations, which clearly revealed the gap in the legislation.

Following this advocacy campaign, the legislation on early marriages was successfully changed. Now the marriageable age in Sweden is 18 years for all people, independent of their nationality. Moreover, if a child, who is permanently living in Sweden, marries abroad, the marriage is not considered legitimate in Sweden.

ZAMBIAN GIRLS BREAK THEIR SILENCE ON SEXUAL ABUSE AT SCHOOL

To consult children, enhance their active participation and make them understand their rights in all that we do, set us apart from other child rights organisations.

Twenty years ago, children's participation started in separate projects but is now integrated in everything the organisation's plans and sponsors.

In Zambia, child rights clubs have been introduced in schools of all levels and in all the nine provinces of the country. To be eligible as a facilitator of a child rights club, a school teacher must be known to have a genuine interest in children. The identified facilitators are trained by a local child rights organisation, supported by Save the Children Sweden. The facilitator then helps to set up a club in his or her school and is responsible for imparting information on rights of the child, to its young members.

In 2004, in a school in Zambia's Eastern Province, the facilitator of the child rights club was accused of molesting girl students and threatening to kill them if they disclosed the secret.

It was by becoming aware of their rights, taught by the same teacher, that the concerned girls, also members of the club, came to realise that the molestation infringed on their human rights. The facilitator had also taught them that they could claim their rights.

At first, the girls were too afraid to speak about what had happened. However they soon realised that one girl was psychologically deeply affected and needed help.

The girls persuaded her to disclose her story. Together they reported the case to the headmaster. Confronted, the teacher denied the accusation and his word stood against that of the children. However, when confronted by 19 abused girls who came forward pepped by the child rights club members, he eventually admitted his wrongdoing. The teacher was arrested, tried and dismissed.

It was the understanding of the UNCRC that led the children to organise themselves to combat injustice. They were able to break the culture of silence attached to sexual abuse and challenge an adult's misuse of power.

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