



Defence for
Children International
Sierra Leone



Consultation with children on their experience as human rights defenders in Sierra Leone

Organized by
Defence for Children International – Sierra Leone & Plan International – Sierra Leone,
in collaboration with
MIRROR; Hope & Hope Girl - Sierra Leone and YACAN

Written submission for the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's Day of General Discussion 2018 "Protecting and empowering children human rights defenders". Submitted by Defence for Children International-Sierra Leone, and Plan International – Sierra Leone, with the technical support of Defence for Children International – International Secretariat (DCI-IS). This document is submitted as part of the Girls Advocacy Alliance programme

About Defence for Children International – Sierra Leone (DCI-Sierra Leone) /
<http://www.dciserraleone.org/>

Defence for Children International – Sierra Leone (DCI-SL) is a local, grassroots non-governmental organisation founded in 1998 to promote and protect the human rights of children in Sierra Leone. DCI-SL vision is to respond to the specific needs of children, particularly those in vulnerable situations, and contribute to the continuous strengthening of the national child protection and welfare system in Sierra Leone. **Contact:** Abdul Manaff Kemokai, Executive Director, Sierra Leone 4 Old Railway Line Temgbeh Town, Freetown, P.O.Box 1078 **Tel:** +232 76 624 060 **Email:** akemokai@dciserraleone.org, manaffkemokai@yahoo.co.uk

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The above written submission is presented by the Girls Advocacy Alliance - GAA. The main goal of the GAA Programme is to ensure that by 2020, girls and young women in 10 countries in Asia and Africa will no longer face gender-based violence and economic exclusion. One of the GAA strategic goals is to increase influence of civil society organisations and networks (particularly girls' and young women's organisations) to play an active role in engaging and mobilising communities against gender-based violence and economic exclusion. This written submission is based on the replies given by children during a consultation organized as part of the GAA activities in Sierra Leone.

1. Introduction

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Committee) has devoted its 2018 Day of General Discussion (DGD) to the theme “*Protecting and Empowering Children as Human Rights Defenders*” which will be taking place on **Friday, 28 September 2018**, during the 79th session of the Committee at **Palais des Nations, in Geneva**. DCI- Sierra Leone and Plan International Sierra Leone organised a consultation with children on the 16th June (the Day of the African Child) to contribute directly to the Day of General Discussion of the UNCRC Committee. 35 children, both boys and girls, participated in the consultation as part of their local child-led organizations’ activities - *MIRROR, Hope & Hope Girl - Sierra Leone* and *YACAN* – which advocate for the advancement of girls’ rights.

The consultation was guided by the concept note, guidelines and the survey developed by the Committee and Child Rights Connect, with the intentions of:

- a) Collecting **children’s views about their experiences** as human rights defenders;
- b) **Assessing legislation, jurisprudence, policies and relevant measures** aimed at protecting and empowering children human rights defenders by providing examples of good practices and challenges, including the children’s perspectives;
- c) **Clarifying the States’ obligations** applicable to children human rights defenders under the CRC and existing standards on human rights defenders;
- d) Identify **key elements for an effective implementation of a child rights approach** to the situation of children who are, or want to become, human rights defenders, including specific recommendations for duty bearers that can inform the Committee’s recommendations to States.

2. Children’s views about their experiences as human rights defenders:

Consulted children define a child human rights defender (CHRD) as someone under the age of 18 who raises human rights issues that concern children and agitate for solution. Children human rights defenders play a critical role in bringing about positive change in their societies. The role of children as human rights defenders mainly involves creating and enabling a space for their work, claiming their rights, and engaging in activities which address human rights issues. In Sierra Leone, the **work of children human rights defenders has focused mainly on prevention and response**. In terms of prevention, children:

- Engage in public awareness raising campaigns held on community radio: CHRDs participate in school and community outreach including public marketplaces on different child rights issues;
- Present position papers to senior political authorities on issues that affect them during the commemoration of the Day of the African Child
- Lobby policy makers and community leaders to protect and empower children as human rights defenders in Sierra Leone;
- Organize charity and/or fundraising initiatives to provide educational support to vulnerable children in communities;

In terms of response CHRDs:

- Monitor child rights abuses in our communities and inform authorities about them. Sometimes we accompany victims to the police and chiefs to make report

- Engage in street demonstrations urging government to address pressing issues such as indefinite closure of schools due to teachers strike

3.What enables children to act as human rights defenders?

What enables children to act as human rights defenders includes the availability of enabling environments with opportunities for engagement, skills trainings and tools to support each other, and support groups including from NGOs and UN agencies. Hence children want to be empowered through the availability of protection policies and safety measures as well as skills to carry advocacy and human rights work

4.Legislation, jurisprudence, policies and relevant measures aimed at protecting or empowering children human rights defenders:

Children’s role as human rights defenders is embedded in the Child Rights Act of Sierra Leone. Their right to be CHRDs is linked to their right to participation, right to express their views and opinions and their right to protection. The Child rights Act specifically has provisions on children’s membership on community and national child protection and welfare mechanisms, such as Child Welfare Committees and the National Commission for Children respectively. The government had also established the Children Forum Network as a national movement of children aimed at representing children’s voice on national issues, including formulation of policies and programmes concerning them. With progress as exemplified above, there has been an emancipation of different children’s rights organisations including child rights clubs across the country in schools and communities with the support of NGOs. These groups are now mainly involved with child rights campaigns, advocacy and peer education programmes and often see themselves as the defenders and campaigners of children’s rights. However, the Government has not yet established separate child friendly mechanisms for CHRDs to claim their rights.

The *National NGO policy* that the Government of Sierra Leone and international partners (such as Ireland) were supporting, was drafted by the previous Government. However, it was not adopted before the change of Administration in March 2018. The new Government, through the Ministry of Development and Planning, organised a meeting with NGOs on June 20, 2018 to review the draft policy again. This is still an ongoing process at the national level.

5. Identify key elements for an effective implementation of a child rights approach to the situation of children who are, or want to become, human rights defenders,

Capacity building component

Consulted children believe that there are natural human rights defenders who have the instinct and intuition to carryout human rights and advocacy work. These are normally children who are always vocal in talking about issues that affect them at home, school, or other places. However, children also believe that natural qualities of children must be developed otherwise they can be underutilized. This is the reason why they believe that children in cities and big towns who are more exposed to opportunities that develop their human rights acumen can better do human rights and advocacy work, than those in rural areas who have no opportunities to develop their natural talents. As a result, big towns and cities are believed to be more likely to have a greater number of CHRDs than rural areas.

Adaptive and Conducive Environments

Children who live in environments that are more aware and more receptive to human rights and people's concerns, are much more likely to do better in their role as human rights defenders, than those in communities that lack human rights education and culture. Children have also learned that the rate of progress and results that they make in their work as human rights defenders depends largely on the initial conditions and level of awareness of the community about human/child rights. In Sierra Leone, there is a large disparity between urban and rural communities particularly in terms of understanding, openness and receptiveness to child rights issues. Rural communities are usually more resistant in accepting child/human rights standards and they have higher tendencies to sustain cultural and traditional practices that are not child friendly. Hence programme developed for CHRDs must consider the targeted environment for its implementation.

Gender Sensitivity

Sierra Leone is still a country with a patriarchal society where boys and men are supposed to be in charge or in control in everything. Boys are perceived to be strong, are expected to be brave and have the ability to challenge or fix odds of the society, whilst girls are expected to stay at home and carry out domestic work. Hence, girls usually face lots of challenges both at home and outside to engage in human rights work. Some people even use religion and culture to keep girls away from public spheres, particularly in Muslim communities. Parents of these girls do not allow them to take part in civil society programmes because they believe it is only for boys. Also, parents need to be sure their girls will be safe while engaging in human rights issues.

To ensure equal participation of boys and girls in human rights work, additional measures must be put in place to ensure equal participation of girls.

It's not that boys are better than us because you see more of them doing human rights work, as a matter of fact they have more opportunities to engage and learn skills and gain field experience much more than us. Additionally, the society accommodates them more. We are just lucky that we now have organisations like DCI that organises specific girls' empowerment programs and educate the society to change their negative mind set about girls. This is the reason why girls are also making progress in the field of human rights now. As girls, we need stronger policies against gender discriminatory practices that give boys more advantage over us or restrain us from doing non-domestic work including activism. *Testimony from Isata Kargbo a 17-year-old girl human rights defender part of the group Hope & Hope Girl. She attends secondary school in Rokupa community, one of the most challenging slum communities of Sierra Leone.*

Safety measures in place

Despite the fact that the CRC and Child rights Act of Sierra Leone have provisions for child participation and activism through the right to express views and opinions, the Government does not see itself as the responsible agency to provide the space and environment to put safety measures in place for children to serve as activist, human rights defenders or child rights advocates. Sometimes government even crack down on children and youths when they mobilize themselves and demonstrate for their rights. For example, in 2015, government police officers shot and killed 2 youths in Kabala, north of Sierra Leone when they mobilized themselves and jumped out to the streets to demonstrate for a youth village project that government wanted to move to another

district. Hence safety measures should be considered paramount in the work of children as human rights defenders.

6. Key lessons learned

- a) We have learned that children who normally engage in human rights or advocacy work at an early stage, end up in the field of activism or community development work when they become adults. This is because human rights work develops passion and interest in people to work outside mainstream government systems and to hold governments accountable for failing to do what they are supposed to do
- b) Children who are engaged in human rights work have the opportunity to learn many practical things outside the school classroom and be able to communicate them well for public dissemination. Through activism, many children are able to develop their leadership potentials
- c) Societies where children are given the opportunity to exercise the rights to express their views and opinions are more likely to have children who are ambitious and complete school
- d) Engagement of children in child rights activism increase their ability to resist and prevent abuse and survive violence. For example, even though teenage pregnancy is still frequent in Sierra Leone, it's neither very common to have a pregnant member of our clubs or sister child rights clubs, nor for them to drop out of school.
- e) We have also learned that children have better power and influence over each other than adults. Child led campaigns reach children more easily than adult led campaigns. This is because children like to seek approval from each other, they like to imitate each other, and they believe that what young people champion is new fashion. Adult led activities or messages are usually regarded as out dated and is unlikely to be imitated by children.

7. Challenges and Barriers

- a) Limited platforms and opportunities to carryout human rights work. Our government has passed the Child Rights Act that guarantees children's rights to participation and expression of views and opinions, but they do not see themselves as people who bear the responsibility in ensuring that children exercise these rights.
- b) Difficulty to consistently follow up on advocacy issues and document results. Our advocacy work is mostly ad-hoc and not systematic due to our school work and domestic demands
- c) Limited knowledge in policies that establish our specific rights;
- d) Misconception of parents and other community adults about children's rights. They always perceive child rights as rebellion against parents and adults or a concept against discipline
- e) It is also difficult for us to mobilise due to domestic duties
- f) Lack of safety measures in place to carry out our work as human rights defenders. Sometimes we are exposed to attacks and abuses from adults
- g) Some NGOs that support our interventions want us to implement projects and report like adults. They don't have child friendly systems in place in partnering with children's organisations

7. Opportunities

- a) The existence of international, regional and national policies that promote and protect the rights of the child;
- b) Existence of child rights supportive organisations including NGOs and UN agencies who provide resources and technical support for child rights groups
- c) Emancipation of child rights organisations/clubs and movements
- d) Growing awareness of the rights of children to participation among government institutions, UN agencies and CSOs, which continues to expand the space and opportunities for children to express their views and opinions on issues that affect them

8. Recommendations

- a) States must develop sustainable mechanisms for systematic participation of children in the development of policies and programmes. This can give children the opportunity to express their views and opinions
- b) States must develop child friendly mechanisms for reporting of child rights abuses and violations by children
- c) States should put in place safe guard measures for young human rights defenders and ensure that the issues that they stand to address are given serious consideration
- d) NGO's and CSO's responsibility in their interventions with communities to make clear the role of CHRDs and lobby for community stakeholders to provide adequate support and protection for them
- e) States must put aside budget and other resources to enhance the work of young human rights defenders
- f) Capacity building for child human rights defenders

Pictures of the consultation made on the occasion of the day of the African Child (June 16, 2018)

