

Protecting Children



***A Biblical Perspective
on Child Rights***

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on **Child Rights**

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Introduction

World Vision is a Christian relief and development partnership that serves more than 85 million people in over 80 countries. Founded in 1950 from the evangelical tradition, to respond to the needs of children orphaned during the Korean War, World Vision is guided by Scripture in its consistent willingness to take a stand when children are in danger.

The study of Scripture points to great themes of justice, compassion, and grace. These themes create underlying principles of social and political expectations that frame the Christian understanding of how our world should be—its true potential in Christ. Today World Vision's mission statement embodies a commitment to follow Christ's example by working with the poor and oppressed in pursuit of spiritual, relational and physical transformation.

For World Vision “the poor and oppressed” manifestly includes the estimated 250 million children who work to secure survival-level income for themselves and their families as child laborers; children traumatized by war; and children scarred by debt bondage, slavery or sexual exploitation. Working with children around the globe has also confronted World Vision with issues of family abuse

and violence, which threaten children in the very place where they should be most safe. World Vision's advocacy to secure protection for children and respect for their rights stems from this experience.

World Vision is conscious of the real pressures faced by children who become adults in rich societies changed by secularization and eroding social values, and that to talk of "children's rights" in these contexts may seem to further alienation between parents and children, bred by selfishness, materialism, and lack of responsibility. Yet, World Vision's own daily work is with children in places such as Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Nairobi, Kenya. We struggle alongside millions of children who fight to survive in families earning less than US\$1 per day. World Vision and its donors share the pain and grief of societies where 25 percent of the children die before they reach their first birthdays. We stand before God as witnesses to the real experience of many millions of child laborers. World Vision ministers to children suffering sexual exploitation, to child soldiers, and to children sold as slaves like nameless commodities.

World Vision's response to these children is born from the prayer of our founder, Bob Pierce, who asked, "Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God." Living out that prayer, he began to raise funds for the orphans of the Korean War. More than half a century later, World Vision is determined to bring a Christian response to the needs of children suffering exploitation, abuse, violence, and trauma. The numbers of children in need are in the hundreds of millions. World Vision believes that each is

precious to God, who knows them by name. God's burden of love for each of these children is not exhausted after the first nine months of their lives, nor even after the first 18 years. The murder of an eight-year-old child in the midst of war is as abhorrent as is the preventable death of a five-year-old child from diarrhea.

The experience of World Vision over the last fifty years teaches us that poverty, exploitation, and violence are not inevitable. Across the developing world, thirty thousand young children die each day, a result of failures of humanity's stewardship of the resources with which God has endowed us. World Vision's mission statement is a call "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8), in a world of false priorities, gross inequalities and distorted values. World Vision represents Christians from many nations working together for a world where all people's God-given potential is respected as the ultimate human right.

Why **World Vision** Speaks of **Rights**

World Vision's preeminent paradigm is Christian doctrine and, therefore, its use of the language of rights is governed not by secular post-Enlightenment political theory but, instead, by our reading of Scripture. When World Vision brings the Christian framework of rights to the table, it does so conscious that families and parents also have rights in a process of mutual responsibility and care.

A Christian Concept of Rights

As Christians, our use of the concept of rights is based on the view that Scripture provides our ultimate guide to appropriate social behavior and relationships. The Bible clearly outlines four essential concepts underpinning social relationships:

1. God confers on people their worth. Worth and dignity are rooted in creation and calling. The human race, including every child, is created in the image of God and given a mandate to participate in the stewardship of God's unfolding Creation. God confirmed the value placed on each man, woman, and child by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for all people as individuals in relation with God. We do not have rights simply

because we exist, but because God chose to give us value, and therefore, rights (Gen. 2; Matt. 25:31–28:18). Creating room for people to be what God intended them to be—as distinct from the concept of human autonomy—is the Christian basis for respecting human rights.

2. Jesus' call for us to love our neighbors as ourselves—far from paternalistic charity—reflects profound respect for others as equal in worth before God, even those who do not share our faith. In fact, it is the visible demonstration of our love, in the real world, that Scripture says will bring people to faith in our Savior. The biblical concept of shalom captures such unity of justice, love, and joy in service to God.
3. The words for “justice/righteousness” are used more than 600 times in the Old Testament and more than 200 times in the New Testament. The biblical sense of justice means restoring right relations between people and God, between people as groups and individuals, and between people and Creation (Isa. 58:3–13). Respect for the rights of others is a duty to God, not just a matter of human relations. Throughout the Bible, the focus is on doing justice for those without power in society: the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor. And protection for the rights of vulnerable groups was not just a matter of charity—it was an obligation under the legal system in the Old Testament. Jesus made it clear that he came to fulfill the Old Testament vision, not replace it; restoring dignity and a rightful place for vulnerable people is a common theme

in Jesus' ministry. This focus is not because vulnerable people are morally superior, but because a society that respects their rights is likely to respect the rights of all. For Christians in any position of influence, the focus is on protecting others without influence and giving of ourselves to allow others to grow, rather than on demanding one's own rights. In fact, Christians throughout history have been called to give up their own rights to secure the rights of others.

4. We are to treat all others (including strangers) as if they belong to God. If I wrong another person, I wrong God. The cry of the victim of injustice reaches the heart of God. Rights are inherent in the concept of morality; without acknowledging that others have a rightful claim, there is no basis for defining what is right and wrong. In Scripture, God's anger is roused by people misusing their abilities and power to harm others. Some Christians are concerned that "rights" talk is self-centered; they prefer a focus on obligations. On closer examination, however, respect for rights is focused on the rightful claim of others, while obligations reflect what I have to do to avoid my own guilt—a truly self-centered approach. If rights are implemented within a framework of individual human autonomy, their expression may be self-centered demands. But defended as an expression of the dignity of every person under God, the rule of human rights counters self-centeredness, selfishness, greed, and other sins. In outlining the way in which each of us should treat others, the Bible also establishes expectations that we in turn should be treated fairly

by our neighbor (Gen. 9:6; Matt. 25:31–46), to our mutual gain.

The biblical basis outlined from the Jewish law to the teaching of the New Testament suggests, in effect, that God envisions a world in which mutual rights and expectations are clearly defined and understood. In the Jewish law, both rights and responsibilities are documented with great clarity on issues such as property, personal injury, succession, and provision for the poor (Lev. 19–27; Deut. 16–27). Thus the NIV translates the totality of provisions for the oppressed as “rights,” so that the injunction of Proverbs 31 becomes: “defend the rights of the poor and needy.” For those in the evangelical tradition, the biblical acceptance of rights is significant.

It is important to recognize that the legal rights granted in Scripture are not inherent based on the recipient’s humanity, *per se*. Rather, they are rooted in our affinity with God. Nor are rights simply the creation of a Jewish social construct (a social pact). Rights are entirely a gift conferred by God. This is in stark contrast to the tradition of Immanuel Kant and Thomas Paine, rooted in the idea that our common humanity provides an adequate premise for rights that in turn are girded by a contractual relationship between individuals and their wider society.¹ The Bible, instead, goes beyond the idea of society as rooted in a pragmatic social contract in which rights are a necessary clause. Rights, as God-given, are bound up with the Lord’s inherent desire for a transformed and just society (Ps. 11:7, 33:5, 106:3; Prov. 29:7; Isa. 1:17, 5:7; Hos. 12:6; Amos 5:15–24; Mic. 3:1–9; Zech. 7:9–10).

True *human rights* for Christians are those God-given rights that cannot be created by humanity but are part of Creation itself. This is not to say that man-made legal entitlements cannot be created in the form of civil rights. In fact, these legal entitlements might be compatible with God-given rights. Alternatively, however, they might sanction legal (civil) rights that are contrary to biblical principles (leaving unrecognized other rights arising from biblical principles). World Vision believes that where legal instruments reflect biblical principles, they should be supported; where they oppose biblical principles, they should be condemned. Christians should also continue to campaign for rights based on the biblical principles of justice to be legally enshrined and respected.

In addition to the test of biblical compatibility, a second dividing line between Christian and secular rights language is the underlying God-centeredness of the Christian concept. Modern secular rights theory can be rooted in an individualistic (and even self-centered) approach. For Christians, the God-centeredness of rights dictates that their focus is not on claims for self, but on the desire to serve others in accordance with the teaching of Christ. Indeed, Scripture calls us consistently to think of the rights of both neighbors and strangers (Prov. 31:8–9; Luke 20:46–47). As Christians, therefore, we see rights in regard to how we value and respond to others, not how we serve ourselves.

God-Given Rights for Children and Parents

God claims sovereignty over the lives of children as over all Creation. Men and women have no mandate from God to destroy or defile Creation; indeed, God's Word extends the responsibility for protecting and safeguarding children—not just to a parent's own offspring but also to the stranger and orphan (Deut. 24:17). Scripture is clear that the need to respect the life of children begins at conception. For this reason, World Vision is unswervingly pro-life in its policies, programs, and advocacy. Equally, the Bible is clear that the worth of a child's life extends far beyond birth. The concept of being *pro-life*, therefore, embraces a sense of righteous anger at a world that allows thirty thousand children to die each day from entirely preventable causes.

Evangelical Judith M. Gundry-Volf has discussed the differences between how Jesus approached children compared to prevailing cultural mores,² changing both the status and role of the child in religious thought. Not only did Jesus extend rights to children, he also made clear that God sees children as individuals. Jesus treated children not as incomplete adults, but as young people called directly to him. It was Jesus who called for children to be allowed to come to him as children rather than subsumed within the collectivity of their family (Matt. 19:13–14).

Jesus also instituted a new idea of service to children, instructing his disciples to welcome them in Jesus' name and valuing their contribution to worship in the church (Mark 9:33–37, 10:13–16; Matt. 18:1–5, 21:14–16). Jesus' decision to treat children as a model of faith (faith must be

childlike, Matt. 18:3, 21:14–16) underlined the responsibility of each person to personally rely on God. God therefore sees children as individuals and as persons with whom to share a relationship.

God's concern for each child means that parenting, like all supervisory roles in Creation, is a task of stewardship. God offers to some men and women the privilege of nurturing sons and daughters of the Lord to adulthood. In some instances, that privilege is conferred on wider society in the place of the natural parents (such as with orphans). The role of stewardship is not the same as ownership, and at no point does God relinquish ultimate sovereignty over Creation or over the child.

As a result, God makes clear in Scripture that children also have rights of expectations from their parents, just as adults do from their neighbors. The apostle Paul creates a demarcation between Christian and non-Christian discipline. Christian discipline, founded on love and concern for the child's relationship with Christ, is to be within bounds that will not provoke, discourage, or embitter (i.e., destroying the nurturing and stewarding relationship; Eph. 6:1–9; Col. 3:18–25). Indeed, part of the role of Christian parenting is to ensure that children understand that rights must also be balanced by responsibility to God and others.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has always seen children as a blessing. Pauline teaching makes clear that this blessing can be despoiled by a failure to model Christ within the home. This biblical framework distinguishes between nurturing, loving parents and those who reject the stewarding role entrusted to them by God. In Scripture, we have

examples of parents who span the range, yet in each instance parents are called to raise their children as though they are trustees for God. Scripture is pointing to a divide between responsible and irresponsible parents—a great gap measured by those adults' willingness to reflect Christ's evaluation of children within their own lives.

World Vision believes that a caring and loving family is the best environment in which children can grow. World Vision therefore holds that the rights of loving, nurturing parents should be respected and affirmed by their communities, nations, and international bodies. World Vision, however, recognizes the fact that some parents will indeed fall short of the Christian ideal. In extreme cases, World Vision knows that some parents will reject entirely a role of nurturing stewardship in favor of a more abusive approach to the children in their care. World Vision believes that God's sovereignty over children supersedes the claims of irresponsible and abusive parents who threaten to destroy the lives of their children. For this reason, World Vision campaigns for children to be protected by their communities (neighborhood groups, specialized groups, and government) from sexual abuse, violence, exploitation and psychological trauma.

The concept of rights provides a useful tool for trying to gain protection for children, particularly through legal instruments defining standards of behavior.³ It is the practical usefulness of the rights approach that has given it a firm place within the arsenal of weapons that World Vision uses in defense of children. It is patently clear that globally, children often bear the brunt of economic, social, and mil-

itary decisions without having any voice in those decisions. Effective work with children will not treat them as miniature adults, the property of adults, or mere extensions of the community. In order to steward their God-given potential, they need to be taken seriously; persons whose God-given rights are just as important as any other component of society.

Notes

- ¹ Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*.
- ² Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," in Marcia J. Bunge, editor, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 2000).
- ³ Rights have also been used to provide a "scaffolding" of development policy in what is termed a "rights-based" approach. Rights then are not as much standards as they are drivers of social policy. In a rights-based approach, individual agency is within a context of state obligations to realize citizen rights. See Julia Hausermann, *A Human Rights Approach to Development* (Rights and Humanity: London, 1998); Clare Ferguson, "Global Social Policy: Rights and Social Justice" (Department for International Development, April 1999); Simon Maxwell, "What Can We Do with a Rights-Based Approach to Development?" Briefing Paper 3 (Overseas Development Institute, September 1999). For evangelical Christians, a rights-based approach is predicated by the need to assess the individual components of the scaffolding (definitions and instruments of rights) against the test of Scripture.

Serving **Christ** in the Real **World**

World Vision has recently conducted four major research projects into the condition of children in the modern world. These initiatives were undertaken with families and communities across the developing world. They have each built upon World Vision's existing expertise as one of the world's largest investors in the lives of children. The World Vision staff has long been involved in strengthening education and health provisions, working with churches, caring for street children, and protecting children at risk. The research results available to World Vision confirm that children are not only vulnerable to the consequences of their poverty but also to the indifference of a world unwilling to shield them from the actions of others.

World Vision's "Child Abuse and Neglect Study,"⁴ undertaken with the University of Chicago, studied communities in five developing countries and found that a chronic lack of awareness created contexts in which the sexual abuse of children could take place undetected. In each location, no local provision existed to respond to children claiming abuse and indeed, any child raising such concerns would routinely be disbelieved.

In Latin America, a regional study on the rising incidence of violence in the region concludes that, while the reasons behind this are complex, there is no doubt that the cycle of violence is fueled by the domestic abuse of children. Children learn the patterns of violence within their families. In fact intra-family violence is a rapidly rising problem in the region. Around 6 million children suffer severe aggression every year, and eighty thousand die due to violence in the home, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).⁵

In Southeast Asia, World Vision has studied the problems of child trafficking and sexual exploitation along with the devastating effects. The problem of AIDS has increased demand for younger prostitutes, who are believed to be less likely to carry the disease, to the extent that 1 million children now work in the Asian sex trade. Children are lured and tricked into sexual exploitation, where they are kept through force and drugs. Finally, World Vision has studied the particular impact of poverty on girls, revealing the disproportionate impact of violence, abuse, infanticide, and poverty.

Recent studies show that abuse of children is a global concern. Researchers believe nearly four thousand children work as prostitutes in Australia and some five thousand have been sold for sex on the streets of Luanda in Africa. In Brazil, it is believed that a staggering three percent of children under the age of eighteen sell themselves for sex (as many as 2 million in any given year). Some fifteen thousand children under twelve years old live on the streets of Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, all at risk of abuse. One-third

Sold into sexual bondage

“Cham” is a fifteen-year-old Cambodian girl who looks about 10. She ran away from her rural home after her stepmother repeatedly beat her. On her way to the provincial capital, she was befriended by a woman who promised her a job in a restaurant. Instead, the woman sold Cham to the owner, whose restaurant was a brothel. The first night, she was forced to go with three men, who took turns raping her. Distraught and sobbing, Cham was then locked in a room where she was to entertain five to ten men a day. If she refused, the owner tortured her with electric shock. Three times, she tried to kill herself. A month went by. One evening, Cham told her story to a sympathetic client who then turned her over to police. The police took her to a World Vision children’s trauma center.



of the fifty thousand prostitutes in Cambodia are under eighteen years old, while forty thousand children are thought to be sexually exploited in Indonesia. The problems of children in today's world are vast in scale and global in extent. In some of the countries involved, communities have been weakened by rapid urbanization or recent conflict. State capabilities have also been weakened by lack of funding, corruption and poor training. Few groups, therefore, exist able to respond to the children most at risk.

World Vision believes that God's love for all children is equal and all are of equal worth. It is, therefore, imperative that all children should have access to at least a minimum standard of protection. That protection should include a legislative framework that clearly outlaws abuse. It should also entail access to properly trained and funded welfare services and to the means to voice concerns (such as help-lines). Adequate protection entails working with churches and schools and informing children of their rights. It is also crucial that there be a greater willingness on the part of rich donor countries to act for the defense of children in poorer nations, for without adequate resources children will continue to be abused and killed.

Notes

- ⁴ *Crying Out: Children and Communities Speak on Abuse and Neglect* (Milton Keynes: World Vision UK, 2001).
- ⁵ UNICEF, "Stop Violence Against Women and Girls," (1999).

Christian Advocacy for Life

An evangelical understanding of Scripture shapes

World Vision's response to the real world faced by children. The Bible leaves no option of silence in the face of injustice; indeed, it calls each Christian to act justly and to speak for the widowed, the orphaned, the foreigner, and the oppressed (Deut. 10:18, 24:19, 27:19; Ps. 82:3; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 22:3). The early church was vocal in its defense of children, arguing against the prevalent practice of infanticide.⁶ Many parts of the Christian church have been strong advocates for biblical principles of justice. The evangelical tradition has been part of many of these initiatives and has long been present within important movements for social reform.

The anti-slavery movement of British parliamentarian William Wilberforce, instrumental in ushering in the modern idea of humanitarian social action, was driven by evangelical zeal. It was followed by the work of Lord Shaftesbury, who campaigned for child laborers in Victorian England and in the process succeeded in changing many of the nation's laws. The Salvation Army of William Booth campaigned tirelessly against childhood poverty, and the temperance movement that it helped to inspire attacked

the social as well as the individual consequences of alcohol. Christians, in the tradition of Wilberforce, Shaftesbury, and Booth, founded many of today's most notable nonprofit organizations working in the developing world and helped to overthrow both the injustice of segregation in America as well as apartheid in South Africa.

Evangelicals' and other Christians' commitment to justice is rooted in their understanding that no aspect of life is free from the concern of God. Just as Christ seeks transformation of the personal and moral sphere in each individual life, so Christ's message also addresses nations with a call for transformation and change. God demands righteousness from rulers as well as the ruled. Indeed, Paul sanctions the authority of those in power only on the premise that such authority is rooted in the greater jurisdiction of God.

World Vision therefore advocates on policy issues with the aim of securing a world that better reflects the gospel of Christ. Achieving justice for the poor is a demonstration of God's love and a sign that Scripture has meaning and life. As a development agency working with millions of children around the world, it is inconceivable that advocacy against injustice should not include a special focus on the needs of children. As a result, World Vision has embraced a commitment to defend the God-given rights of the child.

Notes

⁶ See Gundry-Volf, p. 33.

The **Convention** on the **Rights** of the **Child**

World Vision’s work of defending children entails using the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* as a standard for measuring rights and as an advocacy tool. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, despite being the most universally and rapidly accepted human rights convention, continues to be controversial with some parts of the evangelical community. To a large degree, the controversy centers on the perceived conflict with parental rights—an *over-empowerment* of children—and the belief that these child rights threaten a further erosion of positive Christian values. This section explains some of the myths surrounding the Convention. It argues that if one looks closely at the CRC, it actually strongly affirms the values⁷ Christians hold dear.

Laying Down the Challenge

One of the major criticisms often leveled at the CRC is that it is effectively anti-family. The underlying belief is that the CRC, by instilling rights upon children, creates the vision of an autonomous child with the same human rights as an adult. This poses a real threat to the authority of parents and to the integrity of the family; carried to the

extreme, a child may be able to demand state intervention to challenge any parental conduct he or she does not like.

Many fears concerning the CRC arise from interpretations of the document that are unique to the critics. In reality, the CRC does not open the way for child autonomy. The CRC actually affirms the role of the family. In the Preamble, which sets the parameters for the CRC, it states that “the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance...” and that “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding.” These are fairly unambiguous pro-family statements. Furthermore, Article 5 of the CRC also clearly affirms the rights of parents:

States parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights, and duties of parents...to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the present Convention.

This clearly recognizes that parents have the discretion to make specific choices about how they raise their children. The CRC also stipulates that children have a right to culture and religion and the right to reunification with family.

A Global Conspiracy

A second major charge that has been leveled against the CRC is that it is an instrument of a global UN conspiracy to undermine national sovereignty and independence. In reality, those states parties who sign and ratify the CRC remain ultimately responsible for the welfare of their nation's children. Even those states who have chosen to incorporate the CRC into national law remain responsible for implementing and adjudicating that law. States parties are, after all, voluntary signatories to an agreement that does not give any extraterritorial body the right to impose its will on the country involved.

In this sense, the CRC differs markedly even from a national law, which does not require the agreement of individual citizens and will be enforced directly by the state. The voluntary nature of the CRC has meant that those countries which have signed and ratified the CRC have continued to be responsible for national policy towards children. Those countries with a strong Christian tradition have seen neither an erosion of parental rights, nor a decline in the ability of children to exercise their faith at either church or school. Indeed, World Vision believes that the Convention could potentially be an even stronger tool if strengthened by consideration of the rights of children in regard to religious worship (including at school).

Children as Participants

Recognizing that children are individuals who must gradually develop towards adulthood, the CRC embraces the idea that children should be valued as participants within

the family, under the authority of their parents. In effect, children should learn to take responsibility for their actions partly by offering their own perceptions, thoughts, and ideas. The CRC makes clear that the weight given to the input of children is naturally determined by factors such as their age and level of maturity. Mitchell Woolf, a British attorney specializing in human rights law, points out that “child participation should not be confused with child liberation.”

Part of the misconception that the CRC encourages child liberation is the assumption that rights exist in an unfettered environment. This is not the case, as rights are clearly exercised in relation to the rights of others, including parents and the wider family, and, where they impinge on another person’s rights, their exercise is restricted.

Maintaining a Balance

Linked to the fear that the CRC is in some way divorced from the role of parents is the fear that rights instill a degree of liberty that children, being children, are not necessarily mature enough to handle. Of particular concern to many are issues relating to sexuality, such as access to pornography and rights to sexual experimentation. As previously mentioned, Article 12 of the CRC also recognizes that the child might not always know best:

States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child

being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

One of the underlying principles to the CRC is particularly relevant to the interpretation of articles within the CRC in this debate: the principle of the “best interest of the child.” Article 3 states: “In all actions concerning children... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” This has actually enabled Christian groups to argue strongly against social problems that are clearly contrary to the interests of children such as sexual exploitation and abuse, pornography and drugs.⁸ This key principle, coupled with the Convention’s own recognition that the family environment is best for children, allows Christians to argue strongly for the integrity of the family and the parental role.⁹

Written in Faith

It would be wrong for any group to suggest that the CRC is part of the “hijacking” of the moral agenda by groups that would seek to undermine positive Christian values when in reality it is so useful to many evangelical organizations. Indeed, the process of writing the CRC was, from the start, inclusive of faith, and in the process “breaking new ground.”¹⁰ It was a process in which several Christian groups were heavily involved (the World Federation of Methodist Women and the International Catholic Child Bureau, for example). Furthermore, Christians are also actively involved in the monitoring and follow-up process.

The Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Group for the CRC, with a membership of 43, currently lists 11

faith-based organizations, eight of which are Christian. Several of these Christian NGOs are still very active within the Group, and World Vision is currently a member of the Coordinating Committee. In fact, the CRC is the one UN Convention that actually enshrines the right of NGOs (listed as “other competent bodies”) to submit alternative reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the CRC monitoring body. The NGO Group actively supports the formation of national level NGO coalitions in the countries that have ratified the CRC, and these groups are open to any NGO with experience in this area.

The whole reporting process is also designed to be transparent: the reports prepared by the Committee as well as the country reports are, as stipulated in the CRC, made freely available to everyone and posted on the internet. The ability of Christian NGOs to participate is an opportunity for the voice of faith to be heard. The distinctive contribution of faith-based NGOs has much to offer in a constructive dialogue on child rights. Faith-based organizations also have a strong awareness of the need to help children not only appreciate and use their rights, but also to grow with an awareness of their own individual responsibilities.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors the implementation of the CRC, is itself made up of ten experts selected to be representative of the various regions of the world, and to ensure the Committee has a good spectrum of technical knowledge. While potential members are proposed by states parties, NGOs can and do actively lobby for sympathetic candidates.

Notes

- ⁷ The CRC covers all aspects of children's lives, from the provision of assistance for their basic needs, protection against discrimination and neglect, and prevention from harm, through to participation of children in decisions that affect their own lives. Full text of the CRC is available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>.
- ⁸ It has been argued by critics that the CRC would result in free access to pornography and sexual promiscuity at a young age.
- ⁹ Philip Alston, "The Legal Framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child," *UN Bulletin of Human Rights* (1991, 91/2).
- ¹⁰ Nigel Cantwell, "NGOs and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child," *UN Bulletin of Human Rights* (1991, 91/2).

Is the **Convention** on the Rights of the Child **Useful**?

Like many NGOs, World Vision is supportive of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* partly because it has a very practical role in relationships with governments of developing countries. The Convention is the most signed of any UN document; only two countries remain non-signatories. The acceptance of the Convention by most states provides NGOs with a discussion document around which a dialogue on child exploitation can be framed. Even in states such as Burma (Myanmar), NGOs are able to raise specific instances of problems affecting children with counterparts from the regime through the pretext of the CRC.

The simplicity of the CRC has also enabled nonprofit groups concerned for children in developing countries to publish easy-to-understand guides, raising awareness among children and families of their legitimate expectations in relation to the state. In Vietnam, for example, the National Political Publishing House has published pocket guides to the CRC that can be carried around by those working with street children and other children at risk. In the United Kingdom, a collection of NGOs funded the production of a legal guide for those working overseas on how

they could directly use the CRC to address abuses such as the extrajudicial killing of children on the streets.

Perhaps the most visible signs of the ways in which the CRC has enabled nonprofit groups to raise awareness of child exploitation and abuse are the alternative reports they are able to submit to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee, which sits in Geneva, is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the CRC. The Committee, like all bodies made up of appointees from the sovereign states involved, can vary in the quality and direction of its work. Its existence does, however, give the nongovernmental sector in poorer countries a rare opportunity to challenge the official statistics produced by sometimes corrupt and repressive regimes.

In Geneva, the NGO Group on the Rights of the Child, of which WorldVision is an active member, coordinates and helps other NGOs to submit reports on the treatment of children in their country. The UN Committee does not have the power of enforcement over signatory states. In reality, the sovereign states that sign the Convention are primarily vulnerable to the embarrassment of seeing the scale of child exploitation in their countries publicized more widely. Nevertheless, for NGOs this is a powerful tool in working for children and families. As a result, local nonprofits, often including church groups, have submitted alternative reports from countries such as: Bolivia, Mexico, Romania, Pakistan, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Senegal, Zimbabwe, China, Nigeria, Burma, Cuba and Bangladesh.

Among the groups that have been involved in submitting these alternative reports are the YMCA, the Quakers,

and World Vision. World Vision has been able to coordinate input from local churches and also to call for greater inclusion of Christians in national policy-making. For example, in its submission on Vanuatu in 1999, World Vision suggested the government should ensure that:

A mechanism is developed within the government's planning process to include NGOs, church agencies, and others. A permanent coordinating point needs to be established in order to prioritize needs and channel them into areas that lack infrastructure and/or resources.

The Concluding Observations of the Committee did call for the greater inclusion of churches. The Roman Catholic Church has long recognized the potential role the CRC can play in defending children. In their own submission to the Committee, The Holy See states that: "The Holy See has supported the international community's efforts to better define the rights of the child, and before acceding to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 20 April 1990, it participated actively in the *travaux préparatoires* for that instrument."

The Holy See interprets the Convention in a way which safeguards the rights of parents, made possible by the Convention's own strong emphasis on family.¹¹ The Holy See has also produced its own Charter on the Rights of Families, which it advocates in tandem with its support for the CRC. In turn, member states have been grateful for the role of the Holy See in promoting universal ratification of the CRC.¹²

In turn, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has often sought to press states to consider family values in their policies on the social environments in which children grow. Article 17 of the Convention seeks to protect children from exposure to pornography and other forms of inappropriate information. The Committee has therefore called for countries to tighten such rules, stating at the end of their 1996 session that the problem had become a growing concern. The concern for the family expressed by the Committee has been embarrassingly frank in relation to some states. In the case of Russia, the Committee warned that:

The Committee considers the serious problems of family life in the Russian Federation to be an area of priority concern. The Committee notes with particular concern the tendency towards the breakdown of family culture as regards abandoned children, abortion, the divorce rate, the number of adoptions, the number of children born out of wedlock, and recovery of maintenance obligations. The Committee considers that greater efforts should be made to provide family life education, to organize discussions on the role of the family in society, and to develop awareness of the equal responsibilities of parents.¹³

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, therefore, provides a useful tool for NGOs in raising their own concerns about the treatment children receive with a wider audience. The nonprofits involved can point to issues such as

sexual exploitation, torture, and murder. This tool can be used directly in developing countries where NGOs can use the Convention as a discussion document with government, or through the alternative reporting mechanism of the Geneva-based Committee. The opportunity provided by the Committee does mean that those concerned for families and children can try to shame governments into acting against exploitation, abuse, and violence.

Notes

¹¹ Holy See, *CRC/C/3/Add.27, States Party Report* (28 March 1994).

¹² Holy See. *CRC/C/15/Add.46. Concluding Observations/Comments* (27 November 1995).

¹³ Russian Federation, *CRC/C/15/Add.4. Concluding Observations/Comments* (18 February 1993).

Conclusion

World Vision's mission statement proclaims an intention to serve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by serving the poor. This concept of service is rooted in the idea that Scripture provides a guide to a holistic ministry of reaching out to people in their spiritual and physical needs. World Vision cannot, therefore, avoid the implications of Scripture and the injunction to speak for and with the poor against exploitation and oppression. For World Vision, the biblical call to speak out for children is especially apt and as a result, great efforts have been made to raise awareness of the terrible abuses and injustices that children face. Defining those abuses has meant pointing to the better vision offered in the Bible of children able to fulfill their God-given potential. Advocating for children has inevitably meant defending their God-given rights.

The use of a Christian-rights perspective has enabled World Vision to engage governments directly in dialogue and also to press the cause of children through international forums. The Christian-rights approach has allowed NGOs to articulate concerns through language already familiar to many of those working on children's issues due to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. World Vision


has affirmed this Convention as a guide to standards of protection for the rights of children as well as a tool for advocacy. The Convention provides a framework and an institutional infrastructure that gives free rein to churches and other Christian groups in voicing their desire of justice for children and families. It enables abuse, exploitation, and violence to be exposed.

World Vision therefore advocates for children, their parents, extended families, and communities in the belief that God values Creation and those made in God's image. World Vision seeks to work with other Christians in proclaiming the biblical vision of a just world for children and encourages Christians from all traditions to become involved in the task of creating a better world for children. The experience of World Vision is that standing alongside children suffering abuse, exploitation, and violence inherently means advocating for their God-given rights. World Vision, therefore, also encourages all Christians to call for respect of the rights of children. Life given by God should be respected. Today, the unnecessary deaths of thirty thousand children in the developing world will break the heart of God. As long as this remains the case, World Vision will continue to fight for the rights of children.

World Vision is a Christian relief and development partnership which serves more than 85 million people in some 80 countries. World Vision seeks to follow Christ's example by working with the poor and oppressed in the pursuit of justice and human transformation.

Children are often most vulnerable to the effects of poverty. World Vision works with each partner community to ensure that children are able to enjoy improved nutrition, health and education. Where children live in especially difficult circumstances, surviving on the streets, suffering in exploitative labour, or exposed to the abuse and trauma of conflict, World Vision works to restore hope and to bring justice.

World Vision recognises that poverty is not inevitable. Our Mission Statement calls us to challenge those unjust structures, which constrain the poor in a world of false priorities, gross inequalities and distorted values. World Vision desires that all people are able to reach their God-given potential, and thus works for a world which no longer tolerates poverty.



For information about how you can help create a
world where children are safe, visit our website:

www.childrencampaign.org

International Liaison Office
6 Chemin de la Tourelle
1209 Geneva
Switzerland

United Nations Office
222 East 48th Street
New York, NY 10017

www.childrencampaign.org



World Vision

World Vision Publications
800 West Chestnut Avenue
Monrovia, California 91016-3198
U.S.A.