

Young People as Change-Makers

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Marc Dullaert

In this address, Marc Dullaert, champion of Children's Rights, speaks on the theme of the right to education and participation and how these aspects are embedded in the Convention of the Rights of the Child. He questions us on how these rights are currently applied in practice. In many countries the right to education was and is defined by compulsory school education. And often, when countries

think of education they also think of standardized education. Mr Dullaert argues that such an approach turns children into consumers of 'education', rather than being facilitated on the road to full development and adulthood. He draws various parallels with Maria Montessori's visionary initiative of the Social Party of the Child and highlights some innovative projects that he helped seed.

It is a pleasure and privilege to share with you some thoughts on the occasion of the celebration of Maria Montessori's 150th Birthday at your 2021 online event.

Such a rich and productive life as hers is not easy to summarize, but I would like to highlight some important life-changing moments. Soon after finishing her medical education as a doctor, Maria started working in a hospital. During her traineeship, she saw that mentally challenged children were not stimulated at all and that nothing was done to help them to develop themselves. Their potential was unused. Maria, however, believed that they did have potential, which was a very important insight.

Sometime later, when she headed her first school, the Casa dei Bambini in 1907, in a poor neighbourhood of Rome, she managed to help children to develop their talents and people were amazed. How these children prospered was totally unexpected. People had no expectations of these children at all, but Montessori made them flourish.

Her starting point was that she believed that every child has talents. The duty of adults is to facilitate and stimulate

the talents and needs of the child: 'What do you want to learn, what do you need?' Children then can develop and educate themselves and become independent. Children will guide themselves, the child itself is in the centre. 'Help me to do it myself' is a key motto.

Maria was a visionary far ahead of her time. In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was signed by nearly all the member states of the United Nations. Some 80 years before Montessori had already envisioned a Social Party of the Child whose articles resonate with those of the UN Convention.

- Article 6 of the Convention states that we are responsible for safeguarding the development of children.
- Article 12 establishes the right of every child to freely express her or his views, in all matters affecting her or him, and the subsequent right for those views to be given due weight, according to the child's age and maturity.
- Article 29 states very clearly that the objective of education is to reach a child's full potential, to develop their talents and personality as much as possible.



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The right to education and participation in the best interest of the child are the overarching guiding principles of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. But how are these rights applied in practice nowadays? In many countries the right to education was and is compulsory school education. The right to education in the Netherlands, where I live, means compulsory attendance at school. In most schools education is standardized: All children and adolescents receive the same standardized learning materials, the same standardized exams and, in addition, learning methods are mostly cognitively oriented. It is a kind of pre-industrial system focused on standardization instead of tailormade education. Children are the consumers of this material instead of participants; the right to participate and to be heard as written down in the convention has evaporated.

In this system the teacher has become an examiner rather than a mentor. And yet, the essence is that each and every child is different and learns and develops differently, which is why their needs are not met by standardized education systems. The right to education should be transformed into a right to development — as envisioned by Maria Montessori and only decades later incorporated in the convention.

Sadly, in my home country the school drop-out rate is very high and many children stay at home and fall victim to this system. The role and position of children and youth during the years of their own development and education is not only undervalued in the educational system but also in society as a whole.

Currently 42 percent of the world's population is under 24 years old. And this age group is not represented or hardly ever heard in our political systems. Nowhere in the world can we find an 18-year-old who has a seat in their national parliament.

Far-reaching decisions are made by parliaments and leaders — decisions that will not only affect the current young generation but also future generations. One clear such example are the decisions that are made regarding the climate crisis. Young people are not involved in the decision-making process, but they have to bear the consequences for decades to come.

An important moment in Montessori's life was her establishment and promotion of the Social Party for

the Child, which she started speaking on around 1935. Some of her key points were:

- Every national parliament must have members elected solely to represent children.
- Every government must include a Ministry of the Child to defend and promote each child's 'right to childhood.'
- The question of the child should be represented and considered in every social movement, aiming to achieve peace between peoples.
- Childhood should be considered a nation, The Nation of Humanity.
- And since its population is the most numerous and its importance paramount, the authority of this nation of childhood should outweigh that of any other nation.

Behind these aims of the Social Party of the Child, there are critical and radical assumptions as described by Ginni Sackett — assumptions that affirm that:

- The child has the right to live.
- The child has the right to his own personality and his own work distinct from the personality and the work of the adult.
- And the child has the right to be considered independently as a citizen of the state.
- As citizens, children must be recognized for their human dignity and respected for their unique work as the builders of humanity.

Since the future of society is connected with the child, as unconditionally as effects are connected with their causes, the child must have rights equal to those of other citizens: rights both before the law and through the institutions that direct social organization.

In 1941, in India, Montessori wrote the article 'A Step Forwards to the Future', in which she stressed that the child 'must be recognized as a citizen whose vital needs must be legally represented so that he and his essential

requirements may enter into the world of politics.' Why must the child be recognized as a citizen? Her answer is direct and simple: because the child profoundly contributes to the universal welfare of human society.

Montessori wrote:

It has been scientifically recognised that the child has been endowed with a personality of his own and a creative power which obeys definite laws of growth. It is, in the very interest of society that children must be protected. However, this protection must not consider the child as a weak and helpless creature but as the powerful and essential builder of man. His is a great task...the child is the worker and producer of humanity itself.

It is the child who forges the normality of intelligence; from the child depend strength of character, physical health, bodily beauty, and the unity of the personality that are to be found or not to be found, in the adult.

Here my personal story starts. In 2004, as I was watching the evening news, I saw that a new Nobel Peace Prize winner was announced. That same evening, I saw a documentary about an 11-year-old boy from Pakistan — his name was Iqbal Masih.

He had organized a huge peaceful protest against the horrible circumstances under which many children had to work in the tapestry industry. Thousands of children rallied with him. I was astonished and said to my wife spontaneously, 'they should have given the Nobel Peace Prize to this child.' The following day I started searching the Internet and found many more stories about amazing children. And this idea took root and slowly grew: to set up an International Children's Peace Prize to show the world the amazing change-making capabilities of children and give them a platform to voice their message.



When I suggested this to the Nobel Committee, they politely refused and said that their statutes did not cater for this type of prize and said that the Nobel Peace Prize was a lifetime achievement award not suitable for children. Fortunately, I managed to convince Mikhail Gorbachev, the chair of the yearly Summit of Nobel Peace Prize Laureates.

So, in 2005 the first International Children's Peace Prize (ICPP) was launched during the World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates. The first winner was Nkosi Johnson, who during his short life fought for the rights of children with HIV/AIDS.

Now nearly 17 years on, the message of the ICPP winner reaches more than a billion people around the world demonstrating that children can be real change-makers! Every year we receive nominations from all over the world testifying to amazing and very hopeful stories. In 2011 we received a letter from a headmaster in the Swat Valley in Pakistan about a girl named Malala; she was stubborn and refused to accept that girls were not allowed to attend school, and every day she stood on the doorstep of her school as a sign of protest. We nominated Malala in 2011, the BBC allowed her to write a blog, and the rest of the story you all probably know. In 2013 she received the ICPP and the year after the Nobel Peace Prize, for grown-ups! The first youth in history, only 17 years old.

Continuing to receive so many nominations from all corners of the world, we became more and more convinced that children and youth have an enormous change-making power and that realization, together with the fact that children are not properly represented in decision-making processes and decision-making bodies, prompted us to take a new step.

In 2018 I thought of starting the first *borderless* State for Youth. Young people are borderless and not bound to national identities; their world is the Internet, and they gather in communities on the Internet around all kind of topics. This is how the State of Youth was born. It launched in September 2019 at the World Summit of Nobel Peace Prize laureates in Mexico, and the day after at the Climate Summit in New York.

Today we reach more than 100 million children and youth around the world and organize *preferenda* to ask their opinion and share their thoughts with world leaders. In November 2020 we started with chapters which can organize their own change-making projects in special communities, helping to promote the Sustainable Development Goals through the lens of children's rights. In no less than one month, 132 chapters in 23 countries were started, and we hope to have reached 100 countries by the end of this year. All for and by youth — youth led!

One hundred years ago no one would have believed that women would get the right to vote. Thanks to the courageous suffragettes, it did happen. I strongly believe that we now are on the eve of an emancipation wave of young people. Youth icons like Malala, Greta, and Emma Gonzalez are the moral leaders of today. They represent millions of youths, express their concerns about the future, and demand to have their vision heard, a vision on the future of our world. This is an unstoppable wave.

I would like to end by quoting Maria Montessori once again when she argues that the child must not be considered as a "weak and helpless creature", but rather as "the powerful and essential builder of man". 'His is a great task, the child is the worker and producer of humanity itself.'

Marc Dullaert is the founder and chair of the KidsRights Foundation and founder of the International Children's Peace Prize. KidsRights is active on four continents and promotes children's rights with children as changemakers. KidsRights "gives a voice to the voiceless" as patron Desmond Tutu puts it.

Marc Dullaert was the first Ombudsman for children in the Netherlands and was president of ENOC representing ombudspersons and commissioners for children from 33 European countries. He published more than 30 surveys

regarding children's rights issues and took the initiative to develop the KidsRights Index, an instrument that measures how 196 countries worldwide adhere to children's rights. Marc founded the first ever digital, borderless state, The State of Youth, launched at the World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates and the United Nations in September 2019.

Currently Marc Dullaert serves as the Chairman of the Board of the KidsRights Foundation.