

UN Convention on children's rights: 30 years on

This month marks the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the first international treaty to recognise children as human beings with innate rights. Since 1989, conditions for children have improved, but millions remain unprotected.

Background

The [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC) was adopted in 1989 and entered into force in 1990. Ratified by 196 states, including all EU Member States, the CRC has become the most rapidly, and widely, ratified international human rights treaty ever, signifying a global commitment to protecting children and treating them as [autonomous human beings](#) – equal to adults – with internationally recognised rights.

Main achievements

CRC has promoted changes in national laws to protect children and help them reach their full potential. As a result, governments across the world have acted to [better protect](#) children from violence and exploitation, and it has become easier for children to make themselves heard. Primary school enrolment has [increased](#) (albeit not enough to absorb demographic growth in some regions). The global mortality rate for children under five has been reduced by [more than half](#), with a view to reducing it to less than 25 per 1000 by 2030. Also, better statistical data have enabled comparative studies and boosted focus on children's well-being.

The third Optional Protocol to the CRC

A major achievement is the entry into force, in April 2014, of the third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, on a [Communications Procedure](#) (OPIC), setting up an international complaints procedure that enables children to speak up for themselves on violations of the child rights contained in the CRC. The year 2019 marks the fifth anniversary of the entry into force of the OPIC. So far, it has only been ratified by [46](#) states. It is complemented by two earlier optional Protocols, on [the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict](#), and on [the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography](#) (176 parties).

Global celebrations: An occasion to renew the focus on children's rights

On 20 June 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, underlining the occasion for states to reflect on implementation gaps and to take additional measures to ensure children's rights. The CRC Committee – the body in charge of monitoring states' compliance with the provisions of the Convention – and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) are celebrating the [30th anniversary](#) throughout the year, with a wide range of activities in addition to a high-level [commemorative event](#) held during the 74th session of the General Assembly on 25 September. The global celebrations culminate on World Children's Day, on 20 November. Unicef offices are [cooperating](#) with national and local governments to organise events across the world. In this context, the CRC Committee and OHCHR encourage states to renew their commitment to the Convention by prioritising children's rights at national level, and supporting the initiatives of its partners.

The CRC Committee and OHCHR are urging states to take up serious child rights commitments and actions, to resolve urgent issues hampering the realisation of children's rights, and improve children's lives. The CRC Committee will monitor and follow up on the 30th anniversary commitments, in the framework of state reporting. National pledges are published [online](#) in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Convention. Unicef is also calling for states to sign a joint global [pledge](#) to increase action and results for children everywhere.



Remaining challenges

In the shadow of the international celebrations, millions of children across the world remain vulnerable. Their situation mirrors the global challenges we are facing today: Armed conflicts have sparked violence and new waves of refugees, creating [millions of orphaned children](#) and some [300 000 child soldiers](#). It is estimated that half of all [trafficking victims](#) worldwide are children. As drinking water becomes even scarcer in the developing world, thousands of children under five die every day of [diarrhoea](#), often contracted through dirty water. Poverty and associated health, [nutrition](#) and social problems prevent an estimated 200 million children under five from achieving their development potential. Nearly [half of the world's extreme poor are children](#), resulting in almost one in four children in the least developed countries being engaged in child labour. Moreover, [child marriage](#) remains a widespread problem.

Even in the EU, [some 25 % of children are at risk of poverty](#): children were the age group at the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU in 2017. At the same time, [sexual abuse of children](#) remains a widespread problem, further fuelled by the development of the internet and easy international travel.

Role of the EU and the European Parliament

The **EU** is committed to promoting the protection of the rights of the child, in line with the [Treaty on European Union](#) (Article 3). Children's rights are also enshrined in the [European Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) (Article 24). The Commission proposed a [strategy for protecting child rights](#) in 2006, and 'An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child' in 2011. Its 2008 communication, 'A special place for children in EU external action', emphasised children's rights as a part of all external relations policies. The [Directive on combating sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography](#) was adopted in 2011. The [EU Agency for Fundamental Rights](#) also covers children's rights.

The **European Parliament**, in a 2008 resolution '[Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child](#)', called for consideration to be given to EU accession to the CRC and its then two Optional Protocols. In March 2014, the European Parliament adopted a [recommendation on humanitarian engagement of armed non-state actors in child protection](#), recommending to 'include in political dialogues with third countries, for instance [in] the Cotonou Agreement, the goal of preventing and stopping the recruitment and forced involvement of children under the age of 18 and ensuring their release and reintegration into society'.

In November 2014, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the 25th anniversary of the CRC. Members welcomed the EU's commitment under the Stockholm programme to develop an integrated EU strategy for effectively promoting and safeguarding the rights of the child in the EU's internal and external policies and to support the Member States' efforts in this area. Parliament also called on the Member States to ratify without delay all the optional protocols to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It urged the Commission and the VP/HR to explore ways and means for the EU to accede unilaterally to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Lastly, it encouraged the USA, Somalia and South Sudan to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child in order to achieve universal ratification (Somalia and South Sudan ratified the CRC in 2015). Members also called on the Commission to monitor and report on the implementation of its recommendation entitled '[Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage](#)' in the Member States, and to ensure access to quality services and participation of children. In addition, Parliament called on those Member States with above-average rates of child poverty to set national targets and prioritise investments aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion among children and young people.

In May 2018, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the protection of [children in migration](#). It underlined that all children, irrespective of their migration or refugee status, are first and foremost entitled to all the rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Members urged the Commission to assist Member States in adopting and properly implementing a holistic rights-based approach in all child-related policies. Parliament also stressed that the creation of new safe and legal routes would enable the EU and its Member States to better address protection needs, particularly for children, and to undermine the business model of smugglers. Moreover, Members underlined the importance of establishing a robust identification and registration system based on the best interests of the child, in order to ensure that children enter and stay in national protection systems, with a child-focused approach throughout the entire procedure.

This is an updated and expanded version of an '[at a glance](#)' note from 2014.

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