

Words from children: “A sword of sorrow will pierce your heart.”

“To be honest, I’m angry,” explained Andres, a 14-year-old Nicaraguan, as he talked about joining the 1998 Global March Against Child Labour, held in nearly 100 countries. “I learned about the Declaration of Human Rights at school and I thought that it was signed by all the countries in the world.... So how is it possible that we live in a world where millions and millions of children work in terrible conditions?”

“How has this happened?” Andres went on, clearly incensed about child labour. “How can adults be so cruel? I care about this problem and I am here to shout with other marchers to tell people that it’s time to stop writing beautiful declarations and start really doing something.”

Whether shouts of protest about the more than 250 million children who work in hazardous conditions or wishful words about the power of education, the voices of children resound. Now it is up to the world to listen, for all children and adolescents are ensured by the Convention on the Rights of the Child of their full complement of human rights – including the right to be heard on matters affecting them and the right to freely express their opinions.

On the issue of education, Alberto, a 17-year-old Colombian, says, “You have need

of a key to know. Liberty of thought is the fundamental right and education is the universal key to unlock the knowledge and wisdom that lie in our books and in our history. Every child, every human being has a right to that key, for we all have a right to build our lives on the knowledge accumulated by those who lived before us. Without that key, our world is dark and choiceless.”

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a landmark treaty for several reasons, including its nearly universal adoption by governments throughout the world and its comprehensive approach to children’s rights. With the weight of the Convention behind them, children and adolescents enjoy a new position within the international movement for child rights. Once solely objects of compassion, if noted at all, in need of relief and assistance, they are now active agents with rights ensured by 191 countries. Where once claims were to human kindness, now they are to justice and law.

The following is a collection from various sources of what children have said on such issues as war and conflict in their country, on poverty, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and their right to be heard.

On war and conflict

While the words of children often tell of a bitter disillusion with the world of violence in which they find themselves, their words also testify to their unwillingness to accept life as it is.

“I tell you, you cannot feel the pain of this suffering if you don’t see it physically. If you only glance at it, a sword of sorrow will pierce your heart.... What on earth is it, that man today does not care for his fellow humans?”

(Ugandan schoolgirl who escaped abduction by the Lord’s Resistance Army)

“Authorities of NATO, I am writing to implore you to let all citizens and children of Kosovo live their lives because they didn’t do anything. I’ll tell you something: Why don’t you work things out like grown-ups? Or don’t you think about the people and the smallest of children who are starving? Could you please come to an agreement?”

(Leonardi, seventh-grade Argentine)

“The Declaration of the Children of Apartadó (Colombia) stated that, although we have many problems, we also have the capacity to overcome them. While it is not in the power of children to stop the killing and assassination, we must always denounce it.

“We wrote that neither the guerrillas nor the paramilitaries held the solution to our problems, and they had no role to play in the future of Apartadó. On the contrary, we – the young people – need to be a part of those solutions so that our own children will not suffer as we have done.”

(Farliz Calle, 17, Protocol Child-Mayor of Apartadó)

“It’s a waste of time fighting a war. I could have been in school.”

(T.C., 16-year-old former child soldier in Africa)

On poverty

They speak of injustice and change.

“I am a seventh-grader, living in Pakistan. Even though I’m still young, I can see things that I know could be changed if someone cared.

“Poverty is a very big issue. Most of the population do not have proper homes; the poor make their houses from cloth and straw. Some people sleep and live on the sidewalk. I think maybe no one cares now, but perhaps my generation will care and make my country better for everyone, because everyone has a right to a home.”

(Naiha, 13, Pakistan)

“Sometimes we feel really tired and we ask ourselves, why are we this way? Why are we poor? Why? Why are we treated this way? We are not to blame for this. But that’s life, as they say. They say that life is unfair.”

(Henry, 15, Peru)

“We have 5 per cent of the population living as kings and others living as beggars. I would love to change that.”

(Mehul, adolescent in India)

On HIV/AIDS

More than any other age group, adolescents are clear that when it comes to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, silence and ignorance equal death.

“Youth in Latvia do not have complete and correct information about sexual and reproductive health. Many of us do not know about safe sex and contraception. So many are ill with sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS.... These problems affect the future of young people in Latvia.”

(Toms, 18, Latvia)

“African parents can’t talk about it but they should weigh the scales and decide which is more embarrassing, talking about sex or watching their children die of AIDS.”

(Adolescent Kenyan girl)

“Fifty per cent of the new infections (HIV/AIDS) which take place today are in the age group of 15 to 25. I mean if we are the future and we’re dying, there is no future.”

(Mary Phiri, Editor-in-Chief of Trendsetters, an HIV/AIDS newsletter produced monthly by teenage activists in Zambia)

On the right of children and adolescents to have their opinions heard

And finally, they know their rights.

“It makes me so mad when people don’t take me seriously. Just because I’m young doesn’t mean I haven’t got anything worthwhile to say. Not only should I have freedom of expression, I should also have the right to be listened to!”

(Juan, 17, Peru)

“When the government officials come to listen to us, they do most of the talking and don’t let us speak enough. They should listen more and let us ask difficult questions. Why don’t adults listen better to our concerns?”

(Young Ethiopian)