



## The role of Civil Society in promoting Child Rights

By Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne

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Whenever the expression “Rights of the Child” is mentioned I cannot help but remember my dear friend and mentor on children, the late Dr. James P. Grant. From his youthful days when he served in the US Embassy in Sri Lanka, perhaps as the first officer in charge of USAID, I remember him always talking about the plight of children in the world. When he formed the Overseas Development Council and became its president, I remember him inviting me several times to participate in discussions mostly pertaining to Child Protection, Child Survival and Child Development. Subsequently when he was appointed Executive Director of UNICEF, I had the good fortune to participate with him in many meetings, sometimes with decision-makers in countries where he succeeded in creating a consciousness in the minds of world leaders about the unhappy and unacceptable state of children in the world.

I remember the great assistance he received from Dr. Tarzie Vittachi, Dr. Richard Jolly and others on his UNICEF staff to take the message across the world to make everybody take greater notice of the situation in which children are placed practically in all countries - some due to poverty and violent conflicts, and others due to the negative impacts of affluence and material pursuits. I had the privilege of joining Dr. Jim Grant and his team as a civil society organiser in the USA, USSR, Europe, Japan, Indonesia and several other countries including Sri Lanka.

I remember the historic visit Dr. Grant made to Sri Lanka; Dr. Wickrama Weerasooria, the then Secretary of the Ministry of Plan Implementation, and Dr. Cyril Atapattu who was the Minister of Health facilitated his stay in Sri Lanka. All of them visited Sarvodaya headquarters in Moratuwa. From Galle Road up to Sarvodaya HQ, a distance of one kilometre, we had several thousand preschool teachers from Sarvodaya preschools line up on either side of the road, and receive this great world leader who had devoted his whole life to uplift the conditions of the children. Dr. Grant addressed the nearly three thousand women present in a very emotional talk where he said, I remember, more than UNICEF and the governments it is the responsibility of the custodians of children themselves in their own families and communities to see that every right of the child is upheld and protected in their own location.

My preceding paragraphs may sound as if I am writing an eulogy on my late friend, but it is a tribute which the entire global community owes him for whatever constructive

contributions that have come by way of protection, survival and development of children for the last 25 years. His efforts culminated in passing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child unanimously at the UN to which all member states have put their signatures.

Though we have made great progress since the passing of the CRC, yet we cannot be satisfied with the plight of the children as a whole in the present day world. In certain poorer countries hunger, malnutrition, child mortality, disease, lack of basic education, abuse and exploitation are still rampant. Those countries which resort to violence to solve their internal or inter-state conflicts like Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, so many children lose their lives or are injured as casualties of war. War-makers do not respect human lives not even those of their women and children. When long-distance rockets fall on so-called enemy territory, or when bombs explode, the majority that get killed or wounded are innocents and among them most are children.

The biggest manufacturers of arms and armaments used by all warring parties as well as so-called terrorist groups, are the big powers who have even veto powers at the UN Security Council. So I must emphasise that it is their responsibility to give leadership to save children from these massacres and also give them an opportunity to protect themselves, survive and develop as normal human beings even if they do not have their parents or near and dear ones. While governments and inter-governmental organisations led by UNESCO take every possible step to bring about disarmament and strategies to solve conflicts through non-violent negotiations, civil society has to play an even bigger role at the community level. Sarvodaya is the oldest and largest civil society organisation in Sri Lanka, which has together with UNICEF's assistance, launched several epoch-making programmes for the progress of children. Over 30,000 preschool teachers were trained in Sarvodaya and they served in over 8,000 villages at the height of its child development activities. Not only children in normal villages, but for children in the plantation sector and war-stricken areas also, Sarvodaya carried out child protection and development programmes including nutrition, health care and psychosocial development.

In every community where a preschool was established, there was a mothers' group helping the preschool teachers daily. These mothers' groups were also responsible for carrying out programmes for expectant mothers as to how they should conduct themselves from the time a child is conceived. A programme involving nutrition education, health care, daily conduct, training in meditation, environment and music was conducted under the title – Righteous Approach to Good Motherhood.

The second programme we conducted was for the infancy period where health volunteers were trained to take care of children up to 2 ½ years of age either in their own homes or in Sarvodaya day care centres. The third programme was for children of preschool age viz. from 2 ½ to 5 years of age. At the time Sarvodaya started these services there weren't more than two or three child care centres in the country. However we were able to give the lead, so that today, almost every community in the country is covered by some kind of child development service. Nevertheless, the quality has to be greatly improved. International preschools, like mushrooms, have come up where parents have to pay high fees and yet, most of them lack a spiritual-ethical-cultural foundation which is very essential for the full awakening of the child's personality.

Primary school age and adolescence also should be well catered to. Without conditioning the minds of the children to the prevailing confused thoughts of elders, through real education the child should be provided with a mental, psychological, spiritual and learning environment where his natural personality awakening will take place to the highest potential he possesses.

In Sri Lanka and other countries, where there have been internal bloody conflicts, there is a need to attend to the psychological trauma children are going through. The problem of widows with children should be dealt with simultaneously. No top-down programmes will be that helpful if they do not take civil society into full confidence and engage their full participation; it is foolish to think that governments can tackle this problem alone.

In Sri Lanka, everyday, the disappearance of children, sexual abuse and exploitation and even murder of both girls and boys are reported. While the government should act strictly according to the law, governments should also give full freedom to voluntary and field sector organisations to be partners in the fight against injustice imposed on children.