

Column: Connecting the Dots

The Voice of Children in the Global Arena

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Her melodious and now universally renowned name travelled to every continent, and there was virtually no place where the news of the attack against her –in October of 2012 -- had not been heard. Malala Yousafzai, a sixteen-year old Pakistani girl, not only survived the Taliban’s attempt to assassinate her, but, even before the grave wounds to her head and throat that had nearly killed her had had a chance to heal, she began once again to speak out in favor of the education of girls and women in Pakistan, a cause she has been championing since she was eleven years old.

The frustrated attack on her life immediately sparked a wave of global support. The UN Secretary General invited Malala to New York. She was awarded the International Children’s Peace Prize in The Hague, and teamed up with former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to advocate for Syrian children refugees. In October she met with US President Obama, and has continued to tirelessly promote the rights of girls and women. Malala is, without a doubt, an extraordinary example of the powerful impact a young voice can have when the message is expressed in such a brave, pure and spontaneous manner.

Starting next April, children and youth around the world will, like Malala, be able to denounce the violation of their rights before a special United Nations body. This will be possible thanks to the enactment of the third Facultative Protocol of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which was approved by the UN General Assembly. This instrument will enter into force because it has been ratified by ten UN Member States, two of which – Bolivia and Costa Rica – ratified the protocol just a few days ago.

Colombia has yet to ratify the Protocol, but when it does, Colombian children and youth will be able to make use of this new resource. The most important aspect of this new instrument is

that it validates, as a binding international principle, every child's right to be heard in a global forum like the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which has its headquarters in Geneva.

The challenges to be faced in implementing this Protocol have to do, on the one hand, with the agility of the existing mechanisms, and on the other, with the time it will take to process the claims, which the Committee will only be able to accept for consideration one year after all other legal channels within the country of origin have been exhausted. And once the Committee has accepted a claim for consideration, more time will pass before the Committee, which meets periodically and has a small organizational structure, is able to look into the claim and contact the national government in question. Once the Committee has contacted the government, it, in turn has six months to send its response back to the Committee. We know that responses will not be immediate and that the time lapses may vary considerably. Once the Committee has reached a final decision about a case, it will draw up a set of recommendations for the country of origin's government to take into account in order to correct the situation denounced in the claim. It is easy to see that, given the aforementioned challenges built into the process, no matter the importance or urgency of a claim submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, a final solution will take a very long time. In spite of the fact that the Committee has earned a good reputation since its creation following the approval of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the slowness inherent in this resolution process may have a negative impact on the Committee's credibility.

The value of the Protocol lies in the fact that it creates an official international mechanism for receiving claims directly from children and youth whose rights have been violated, eliminating the need for children to carry out heroic acts like Malala. If Colombia were to ratify the Protocol, and we hope that it will do so immediately, the testimonies of thousands of Colombian children who have suffered from the violent actions of illegal armed groups must be submitted to the Committee, so that these children's suffering shall not be cast into oblivion.

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