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## Children's Rights are Future Rights!

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# The Current Column

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## Children's Rights are Future Rights!

Bonn, Osnabrück, 8 December 2014. To mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we are dedicating this year's Human Rights Day, annually commemorated on 10 December, to the children and young people of the world. While children's rights appear self-evident today, they are not in terms of international law. Indeed, they are no older than the fall of the Berlin wall: It was on 20 November 1989, that the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In effect, it applies the two basic human rights agreements of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to the special living environment of children. It thus anchors four basic principles of children's rights in international law: non-discrimination, adherence to the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and respect for the views and the will of the child.

Children have rights of their own. They are neither small adults, nor exclusively passive objects of care and charity. Arguably, the significance of the paradigm shift codified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child is commensurate to the fall of the Berlin Wall. For the maxim of "parental force" which parents hold over children who are allocated to them in a manner similar to that of possessions, is replaced by the enlightened perspective of independent rights of people under the age of eighteen. The realisation – or denial – of the rights of the child significantly determines the development opportunities of children and young people both individually and in their respective social context. Environmental protection played no explicit role in the formulation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child although it had long been considered a determinant for the realisation of the basic rights of the child.

For a safe and intact environment is required in order to ensure that children can develop and evolve well both physically and mentally. In addition, the opportunity of being able to grow up in a healthy natural environment is extremely unfairly distributed: between developed and developing countries, between rich and poor. Children in developing countries are exposed to particularly high risks, such as the lack of access to clean drinking water and sanitary facilities, or exposure to indoor air pollution through open fires. Added to this are the hazards of untrained handling of chemicals and being deprived of the natural basics for life due to industrial effluents and agricultural chemicals.

Without restructuring of the political, legal and economic framework conditions, this situation will not

change fundamentally. On the contrary, the increasing depletion of natural resources and overloading or destruction of ecosystems lead to a scarcity of safe and healthy environments. Consequently, only minorities of future generations will be able to enjoy the benefits of an intact environment. Navanethem Pillay, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has therefore highlighted global environmental problems such as climate change and the loss of biological diversity as key challenges for the realisation of human rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This is particularly true with regard to the rights of children and future generations.

In today's discussions of key future issues, only a few players in the field of development policy have committed to explicitly taking the rights of children and young people into account and to facilitating effective participation for future generations. The Federal Government of Germany acknowledged this in 2011 in a strategy paper by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Also the BMZ's recently presented "Charter for the Future", at the same time a beacon project of the German Strategy for Sustainable Development (SNE), strongly emphasises the relevance of children's rights with regard to development policy: the well-known problems of poverty and the effects of systematic abuse of human rights are exacerbated wherever children and young people are structurally disadvantaged.

Therefore, children's rights are future rights. As such they belong at the very centre of the current debate on sustainable development and the post-2015 agenda. The recently published "Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General on the Post-2015 Agenda" may also be interpreted in this way as it underlines the rights of children and future generations as a normative reference for key dimensions of global development goals. The interdependence between environmental protection and the protection of human rights in the context of sustainable development prospects can no longer be ignored. It is expedient therefore that Germany should assume the Presidency of the UN Human Rights Council in 2015, a year that is to be so significant for global development policy. There will be many opportunities in this responsibility to effectively advance and promote the emergent interlinkages of the debates on human rights and the environment, as well as to promote children's rights as being part and parcel to the debate on sustainability. For this endeavour we wish all the best – since from a sustainability perspective the following holds true: children are liable for their parents' actions!