

# THE FUTURE OF THE CHILD RIGHTS CAUCUS

## A DISCUSSION PAPER

### **SUMMARY**

*The Child Rights Caucus was created early in 2000 to serve as an NGO lobby group pressing for a strong rights-based approach to the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children. It subsequently became the main NGO caucus at the preparatory meetings for the Special Session, using an email network to enable NGOs world-wide to participate in the negotiations and operating as a focal point for NGO lobbying. Preliminary evaluation suggests that the Caucus has been seen by NGOs, governments and the UN as an effective and well-organised grouping which made a significant contribution to the development of the negotiations and enhanced NGO participation in the process.*

*This paper considers the future of the Child Rights Caucus after the re-convened Special Session on Children in May 2002. It suggests three options:*

- *Continuation of the Caucus as an independent entity*
- *Merger with an existing international NGO child rights network*
- *Bringing the Caucus to an end after the Special Session*

### **I. BACKGROUND**

The Caucus was formed in early 2000 in response to specific concerns about the nature of preparations for the Special Session on Children. Based on early materials prepared by UNICEF, it appeared that the Special Session would firstly, have a 'welfare' or 'needs-based' approach rather than a strong rights-based approach and secondly, be limited to "traditional" children's issues (especially health and education) rather than the full spectrum of children's rights. Furthermore, the early materials did not pay sufficient attention to implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child - as a result, there was concern that the Special Session would not be used as an opportunity to advance implementation of the CRC. To achieve a comprehensive rights-based approach, it seemed that a broad based and organised advocacy effort by NGOs was therefore necessary. The Caucus formed because no such effort was underway by any of the existing international children's groupings.

The purpose of the Caucus was defined as promoting full implementation and compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensuring that child rights were given priority during the Special Session on Children and its preparatory process.

## II. BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE CAUCUS

From the perspective of NGOs involved in the preparatory process for the Special Session it appears that the Caucus has brought the following benefits:

- 1) *An opportunity to be active and have influence:* It has provided an avenue for child rights-oriented organisations to be actively involved in the UNGASS process and to advocate for a comprehensive, rights-based approach.
- 2) *High quality analysis and documentation:* It has provided timely and thorough analysis of the outputs of the UN, and made these products (Alternatives texts, Caucus statements, etc.) available for Caucus members to help develop and use in their own advocacy.
- 3) *Strategy and lobbying:* By organising pre-PrepCom strategy days, the Caucus has brought together like-minded NGOs to share information and to discuss and agree upon strategy and messages. Between PrepComs the Caucus has lobbied governments and circulated Caucus documents. The Caucus also allowed NGOs to obtain reports directly from government delegates and to organise a group-wide lobbying effort.
- 4) *Information sharing and effective networking:* E-mail updates have been used to keep Caucus members informed and to collect input from them.
- 5) *Focus:* The Caucus has had a clear, specific goal, and the time-specific nature of UNGASS has provided momentum to its activities.
- 6) *Inclusive and unifying:* It provided an overall 'umbrella' under which all organisations with a commitment to full implementation of the CRC - whatever their thematic or geographic interests - could group.
- 7) *Complementary:* The Caucus provided an avenue for NGOs and thematic and regional caucuses to work together, giving each additional force and support.
- 8) *Recognition* by governments and UN agencies on the significant role of NGOs in shaping the global agenda for children.

## III. ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE CAUCUS

- 1) It brought together a world-wide group of NGOs around unified goals with a single voice, taking unified action.
- 2) It has been recognised as a significant "player" in the preparatory process for UNGASS.
- 3) It has achieved the recognition and respect of UNICEF, governments and NGOs.
- 4) It has achieved substantial improvements in the Outcome Document for UNGASS, particularly:
  - a stronger rights-focus
  - a much more balanced and comprehensive treatment of children's rights, in particular, a much stronger focus on protection issues.
  - Stronger references to child labour, children and armed conflict,

- Stronger emphasis on participation
- Other caucus concerns reflected

#### **IV. CURRENT STRUCTURE AND RESOURCES:**

The Caucus has operated as a loose network, with no formal membership requirement beyond each participants' stated commitment to the Caucus' goals. Caucus "members" have been those that participated in Caucus meetings and activities during PrepComs, provided input to Caucus documents, or simply asked to be included on the Caucus' e-mail list. Those organisations that wished to do so (approximately 100) formally endorsed the Caucus's "Child Rights Agenda." On other documents (e.g. successive versions of the Caucus's 'Alternative Text' documents), members are listed as "contributors" to demonstrate the strength and breadth of the Caucus.

The Caucus currently has a 8-member Co-ordinating Group that was elected by Caucus participants during the 2<sup>nd</sup> PrepCom. It is responsible for maintaining communication with Caucus members, proposing Caucus strategy, preparing materials, and setting up and facilitating meetings. As co-convenors of the Co-ordinating Group, Save the Children UK and Human Rights Watch have provided additional staff time and resources to maintain e-mail lists, produce initial draft documents, compile Caucus feedback for statements and alternative texts, set up meetings, reproduce documents, distribute Caucus materials to UN missions, etc. Although the amount of time has varied (e.g. it was much more intensive in the lead-up to the PrepComs), it has probably required on average, at least 50% of a full-time staff position.

#### **V. WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN TO THE CAUCUS AFTER UNGASS?**

Inevitably, there have been questions raised about the future of the Child Rights Caucus after the Special Session on Children. The Caucus was created specifically for the Special Session on Children and it had originally been planned to end the Caucus shortly after the Special Session. However questions have been raised about the possibility of continuing the Caucus in some form after the Special Session. These options are discussed below.

##### **A. Possible roles of the Caucus after UNGASS**

The Caucus' experience so far shows that in order to continue to be effective, its objectives should remain specific and well-focused. Future objectives could include some or all of the following:

- 1) To exchange information on implementation and follow-up to UNGASS;
- 2) To support national-level advocacy for effective implementation of the UNGASS plan of action and co-ordinate review at the international level, possibly through an informal five-year follow-up;

- 3) To function as a collective tool for NGOs to participate formally in the mechanisms which will be agreed to monitor the implementation of the plan(s) of action;
- 4) To push for a strong child-rights approach in other international fora – e.g. in the World Summit for Sustainable Development in September 2002 and other upcoming conferences;
- 5) To continue advocacy for full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 6) To be a truly international child rights organisation/network with members at national and international levels in order to do all of the above and to unify the NGO child rights constituency at a global level.

## **B. What is necessary to ensure continued effective Caucus activity?**

If the Caucus is to have a future after the Special Session this would require:

- 1) Interest and commitment from members in continuing;
- 2) Identification of a clear goal or goals with broad Caucus support;
- 3) Regular communication with members;
- 4) Ability to meet periodically;
- 5) Leadership from a co-ordinating group, with at least one or more members giving substantial time and energy.
- 6) Staff-time to support the leadership of the coordinating group.
- 7) An agreed-upon structure, either as a formal organisational structure or a loose networking scheme.
- 8) An operating budget (possibly membership fees from member NGOs).

## **C. Possible models for continuing:**

In this section we look at three possible options for the future of the Caucus.

### **1) Continue on as an independent Child Rights Caucus;**

#### *Advantages:*

- Utilises the continuing interest and energy of members
- Can build on the positive work and profile of the Caucus
- Could focus on follow-up to UNGASS and implementation of the Plan of Action and the CRC and/or on co-ordinating child rights lobbying in New York and at other UN conferences
- Could fill a vacuum that the UNGASS process has identified at the international level

#### *Disadvantages:*

- Once the Special Session is over and a major focus such as that event is lost, energy and commitment to the Caucus may sharply reduce
- What might be a new unifying goal for the Caucus's work?

- It might be difficult to maintain momentum without opportunities to meet (such as have been provided by the PrepComs for the Special Session)
- Without the focus on the Special Session, the Caucus may simply be duplicating the mission of the Geneva-based NGO Group for the CRC
- Staffing and other resources; organisations that have provided personnel and financial support up to now may be unable or unwilling to continue

## **2) Merge with an existing international child rights network such as the NGO Group for the CRC in a revised structure**

### *Advantages:*

- Of existing entities, the NGO Group is the closest to the Caucus's purpose, interests and goals
- Many of the same organisations are involved in both groupings
- The NGO Group is already linked to national coalitions for the CRC and has been facilitating Caucus communications with those coalitions
- A focus on the CRC would be consistent with our message to unify the Plan of Action from the Special Session with implementation of the CRC. The NGO Group has excellent contacts with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- The NGO Group already has paid staff and an office
- Such a merger could unify Geneva-based and New York-based advocacy on child rights
- A merger could put new energy into the NGO Group, which was very successful in negotiating the CRC but has been less purposeful since

### *Disadvantages:*

- The NGO Group is currently perceived as very Geneva-focused
- The NGO Group has not been not very active up to now in advocacy beyond work with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UN Commission on Human Rights
- The NGO Group would need to open up its membership to allow much broader membership, including national NGOs (N.B. the NGO Group recently agreed to revise its membership criteria to open up membership more widely) and to broaden its activities and objectives
- Additional staff may be needed.

## **3) Close/Disband, possibly with option to re-form if need arises.**

### *Advantages:*

- "Quit while we're ahead." The Caucus has largely been successful in what it set out to do.

- Consistent with the original vision of an ad hoc caucus focused solely on UNGASS, rather than a permanent entity
- Follow-up to UNGASS needs to be done primarily on a national basis, making an international caucus much less important or necessary.

*Disadvantages:*

- It fails to capitalise on existing assets, i.e. credibility, track record, membership and energies
- It may miss opportunities for UNGASS follow-up
- It may reduce our ability to act as an unified international bloc to influence UNICEF, other UN and international meetings
- It could leave a vacuum that it has been filled for the past 16 months if other organisations do not respond by filling it.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This paper aims to stimulate discussion about the future of the Child Rights Caucus. We hope that it will be basis for discussion over the coming months which can contribute to a decision by the members of the Caucus at the Special Session in May.

If you have comments, suggestions or ideas on the future of the Caucus that you would like to share with other members of the Caucus please send them to Jo Becker ([beckerj@hrw.org](mailto:beckerj@hrw.org)) and/or Bill Bell ([b.bell@scfuk.org.uk](mailto:b.bell@scfuk.org.uk)) by February 1. We will collect your input and then circulate it to the members in a consolidated form.

The Co-ordinating Group of the Child Rights Caucus  
December 7<sup>th</sup> 2001