

UNICEF Partnership with Academia to Advance Child Rights

The Child Rights Centers Initiative in Greece

Paper by Ghassan Khalil, *PhD* and Vasilis Fasoulis, *PhD*

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A. The concept of Child Rights Centers

The Child Rights Centres are knowledge hubs within universities that serve to promote and mainstream child rights in society. The Child Rights Centres initiative builds upon a strongly established institution in modern societies that performs critical social functions beyond learning; among its other roles, university education supports social development by fostering social values, principles and norms that promote democracy, human rights and active citizenship.¹ As such, universities constitute the ideal vehicle to promote the child rights agenda across society. On the other hand, universities can also benefit from the establishment of Child Rights Centres to serve as a point of reference for children's rights. This is reciprocally advantageous both for the universities and for the advancement of child rights. Moreover, Child Rights Centres have been designed, established and supported based on a built-in capacity approach. In other words, UNICEF makes sure to expand the interest in children's rights and supports interested professors of universities to become experts in child rights so a solid ground at universities is created.

The Child Rights Centres initiative as an operational concept of a meaningful partnership between UNICEF and Academia was introduced and launched in 2020 in Georgia by the UNICEF Representative at that time, Dr. Ghassan Khalil. It was very well received by Akaki Tsereteli State University in the city of Kutaisi, followed by other six State universities and later by three private universities.² The successful evolution of the Child Rights Centres concept in Georgia between 2020 and 2023 quickly demonstrated its utility by validating the theoretical assumptions upon which the selection of universities to take on this task was based and led the way to replicating this model in Greece³, while potentially this partnership can be replicated in other countries as well.

i. The contribution of the Child Rights Centres in implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The multilevel contribution of the Child Rights Centres due to their critical functions can effectively support the implementation of the Convention on the Rights

of the Child. Given that the functions of the Child Rights Centres adequately support some key "general measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child",⁴ as set out in General Comment 5 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Child Rights Centres themselves can serve as an overarching enabler for making the Convention on the Rights of the Child a reality for every child. Specifically, the Child Rights Centres certain critical administrative and other measures (non-legislative measures) required for the effective implementation of the Convention, such as: monitoring child rights implementation; generating evidence and data; training and capacity building; enhancing cooperation with civil society and international cooperation; and making the Convention known to adults and children. This renders the Child Rights Centres a strategic initiative for implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As the Convention is a legally binding treaty, every country around the globe can benefit from the operation of such Centres. An additional comparative advantage of the Child Rights Centres to support the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is that the Centre concept is easily transferable and adaptable to any country context; it is also cost-efficient, as it enables a significant systemic transformation in the long term at a low financial cost, which ensures its sustainability.

"Children's rights are an integral part of human rights. They are not special rights, but Special Human Rights. The development of international human rights law has caused the positive development of the traditional concept that considered 'Rights' as legal enforcement procedures only, to turn it into a concept that consecrates 'Rights', and specifically 'Child Rights', as an effective tool for the improvement of the situation of children all over the world."

- Ghassan Khalil, Child Rights: The historical evolution, Chemaly & Chemaly, Beirut, Lebanon, 2002, p. 111 & 147.

1. Laker, Jason, Concepción Naval and Kornelija Mrnjajac (eds.), *Citizenship, Democracy and Higher Education in Europe, Canada and the USA*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014.

2. Kirtskhalia, Eteri, "Mission Report, Supporting the establishment of Child Rights Centers in Greece", January 2024.

3. To support the Child Rights Centres initiative in Greece, an internal Taskforce was established in September 2023. The membership of the taskforce includes the following UNICEF staff (in alphabetic order): Marina Drymalitou, Vasilis Fasoulis, Ghassan Khalil, Kleopatra Laina, Elena Marda, Giorgos Simopoulos.

4. Khalil, Ghassan, *Child Rights: The historical evolution*, Chemaly & Chemaly, Beirut, Lebanon, 2002, p. 120.

ii. The regional focus of Child Rights Centres

The operational approach of the Child Rights Centres follows the principle that human rights are realized at local level.⁵ For this reason, in terms of governance and given the independence of local governance, investing in and engaging with municipal and regional authorities, as well as with other local actors, is a key prerequisite for effectively and holistically upholding child rights in every corner of a given country. As such, Child Rights Centres have a strong reference to the local level to ensure that all children, regardless of the area in which they reside, have their rights taken seriously into consideration by the local context. The Child Rights Centres are envisaged to operate as drivers for integrating child rights at local level through partnerships with local actors, institutions and structures.

“Child rights are realized at local level: in every school, in every neighbourhood, in every community, in every sport and leisure club. Thus, it’s important to strengthen the culture of child rights at this level through investing in and cooperating with governments, institutions, and actors at local level. For this reason, the Child Rights Centres started in Georgia with a strong regional approach, and in Greece the plan envisages establishing 13 Child Rights Centres covering all 13 administrative regions of Greece.”

- Ghassan Khalil, UNICEF Representative in Greece

iii. The contribution of Child Rights Centres to the implementation of the UN Secretary-General Guidance Note on Child Rights Mainstreaming

The Child Rights Centres initiative also serves as the right platform to demonstrate the commitment of the UN system to strengthening the mainstreaming of child rights within their country programming, as expressed in the Guidance Note of the UN Secretary-General on Child Rights Mainstreaming (2023).⁶ More specifically, the Child Rights Centres will contribute to “the capacity building of and technical assistance to governments and civil society on child rights... to identify and tackle the challenges that hinder the full recognition of children as rights holders”.⁷ Within this framework, the Child Rights Centres adopt a holistic child rights-based approach as guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees that children are recognized as active subjects with a full spectrum of rights including civil and political rights.

In addition, the Child Rights Centres realize the guidance of the UN Secretary-General on linking child rights to the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁸ Investing in child rights is a requirement for a sustainable future given that children who are agents of change need to have their rights and capacities realized so that they can actively partner for the realization of the SDGs. In addition, as relevant theory has demonstrated,⁹ children constitute a variable of social analysis, thus child-related issues need to be



5. Collins, Tara, “The general measures of implementation: opportunities for progress with children’s rights”, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2019, pp. 338-356.

6. Guidance Note of the UN Secretary-General on Child Rights Mainstreaming. Call to Action for Human Rights, July 2023.

7. Ibid, p. 9, bullet point 1.

8. Ibid, p. 8, bullet point 6.

9. James, Allison, and Alan Prout, eds, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*, 2nd ed., Routledge/ Falmer, London, 1997, p. 8.

mainstreamed across all SDGs. Based on these two principles, the convening power of UNICEF, in line with SDG 17 on partnerships to achieve the SDGs, has the capacity to establish strong partnerships, such as those with Academia regarding Child Rights Centres, that can place children and their rights at the heart of sustainable development and thus contribute to it.

Furthermore, the Child Rights Centres are best positioned to act as a catalyst for mainstreaming child rights across other UN agencies. Established under the auspices of UNICEF, which under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 45) is designated to support its implementation, Child Rights Centres have the potential to provide the theoretical and conceptual background and the necessary actionable guidance to UN agencies for effectively strengthening and elevating the child rights agenda in their working methods and activities.

B. The added value of Child Rights Centres in Greece

Greece has made considerable progress in advancing the rights of children in recent years. However, their full realization, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child Greece has signed and ratified, is yet to be achieved. Targeted policies and consistent financial commitments that specifically meet the needs of children need to be further strengthened. In addition, there is a narrow vision of how child rights are relevant to all aspects of social life. In specific cases, social perceptions of child rights lag behind compared to other social or political values, while children are usually seen as passive objects of protection, rather than active subjects of rights, or as dependent, incompetent, and lacking autonomy and agency, denying them their capacity to make decisions for themselves and actively participate in social life. Challenging these perceptions requires a scientifically driven approach which Child Rights Centres can mainstream across society and its formal and informal institutions. This, in turn, can positively impact children's well-being and development. Concerted efforts and stronger synergies with partners who can place child rights at the centre of their work are essential. In that sense, Child Rights Centres constitute a critical investment where the long-term outcome is a stronger culture able to uphold child rights in society. As such, they are best placed to ensure that child rights are considered both conceptually and in practice.

i. The role of Child Rights Centres within Greek universities

When it comes to Greek universities, despite advances over the last decade, the integration of child rights across university curricula needs to be further strengthened. Child rights only appear as a distinct course (not as a core requirement but as an elective course) in the curricula of very few

faculties of pedagogy, or they are partly addressed in the context of other disciplines (usually public, international or constitutional law in the faculties of law). However, even in these cases, child rights are only seen in strictly disciplinary terms, leading to a fragmented approach that limits students' understanding of their more modern conception. In the wake of recent developments, child rights have emerged as an autonomous scientific discipline resulting in the need for a more cohesive and interdisciplinary approach that ensures a comprehensive understanding of child rights beyond the boundaries of a specific discipline. This will increase the impact that universities can have in promoting knowledge and awareness of child rights. Similarly, high-quality thematic research on child rights issues, even though present, is not always conceptualized through the lens of a child rights-based approach. Additionally, it is not organized under a cohesive framework and structure within universities that can effectively consolidate and disseminate the relevant knowledge generated. This means the knowledge is not visible and accessible to government agencies and policymakers to inform their decision-making and positively impact the realization of child rights in Greece. Its academic and broader social mainstreaming also remains limited. In addition, the role of university institutions in promoting child rights across society can be further strengthened by adopting a more coordinated and extroverted approach, addressing actors and institutions in their context beyond the field of education. The contribution of Child Rights Centres is expected to gradually address these shortcomings in the long term by establishing and institutionalizing an academic culture that considers child rights as an autonomous subject that is based on an interdisciplinary scientific approach and will lead to the development of an stand-alone syllabus within the university curricula.



ii. The establishment of Child Rights Centres in Greece

For the first time in Greece, UNICEF is establishing Child Rights Centres in collaboration with universities aiming to cover all 13 administrative regions of Greece. The initiative acquires an institutional format within universities, as the Centres are established for both symbolic and operational reasons at a high level within the university structure under the authority of the rector. In addition, following a meeting between UNICEF Representative in Greece Dr. Ghassan Khalil and the Minister of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports Mr. Kyriakos Pierrakakis in September 2023, the Child Rights Centres initiative secured the political recognition and support of the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports.

iii. Building capacity in child rights within universities

The first Child Rights Centre was established at the University of Patras in October 2023, followed by Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in November 2023 and Democritus University of Thrace in February 2024, with more to come in 2024, until the 13 administrative regions are covered. To create a solid ground for the operation of the Child Rights Centres once a Child Rights Centre is established at every university, UNICEF is providing a two-day consultation workshop, with professors and scientific staff to introduce and discuss the concept of Child Rights Centres and their pivotal role and function in promoting child rights. The consultation workshops also aim at providing an overall orientation to the fundamental principles and historical evolution of

child rights, the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its four guiding principles, as well as the complementarity of the Convention with other related international human rights instruments and the incorporation of child rights into university curricula. In January 2024, two-day consultation workshops for the newly established Child Rights Centres at the University of Patras and at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki were held and were received with enthusiasm, great interest and attention by the attending professors and scientific staff of the universities.¹⁰ The consultation workshops were facilitated by the UNICEF Representative in Greece and Dr Eteri Kirtskhalia, the Coordinator of the Child Rights Centres at UNICEF Georgia. The consultation workshops will be followed by a four-month professional learning programme to allow interested university professors and lecturers to acquire and strengthen in-depth knowledge on child rights and become 'Child Rights Professors'.

"The Child Rights Centres constitute a valuable opportunity for universities to strengthen their openness and extroversion to society and to spread knowledge beyond the walls of the campus."

- Ghassan Khalil, UNICEF Representative in Greece



10. Kirtskhalia, Eteri, "Mission Report, Supporting the establishment of Child Rights Centres in Greece", January 2024.



C. The Child Rights Centers functions to advance child rights

The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides the guiding framework for the operation and objectives of the Child Rights Centres, which are realized through three main functions:

- a. Promotion of child rights;
- b. Generation of evidence-based knowledge on children; and
- c. Teaching and integrating child rights into the university curricula.

i. Promotion of child rights

The objectives

Universities are uniquely positioned to disseminate knowledge about child rights beyond their student bodies and help establish a stronger culture for upholding child rights through their links to different sectors of society. In their local context, Child Rights Centres have the potential to act as platforms for fostering partnerships and engaging with child rights actors outside the university, as such as central and local government and authorities, schools, local communities, civil society organizations, the private sector and professional groups to actively promote, advocate for and raise awareness of child rights. Activities to promote and build awareness of child rights include developing training modules and delivering trainings, workshops, seminars and conferences, capacity-building activities for professionals working with and for children,¹¹ public campaigns and lectures, as well as developing and disseminating relevant educational and informational

resources. Child Rights Centres aim at integrating the practical application of child rights into the social life by mainstreaming child rights across disciplines and social actors in different sectors.

The expected outcomes

The outcome of this function is that Child Rights Centres are transformed into active hubs and reference points at local level for promoting, advocating for, and raising awareness of child rights, thus generating a multiplier effect that leads to a stronger child rights culture and greater awareness in society. The role of Child Rights Centres as local hubs will increase the interaction of universities within their local context that will mutually enable universities and local actors to strengthen their synergies, identify common objectives and develop innovative solutions to advance the realization of child rights based on local needs. The operation of Child Rights Centres within this framework is expected to increase the social import of child rights by increasing individual and institutional awareness and accountabilities to respect, uphold and protect the rights of all children. It is noteworthy that while each Child Rights Centre will be serving the respective administrative region, all the Centres will be closely connected through 1) delivering within the same vision and approaches and mainly within the three key functions and expected outcomes, and 2) through networking and exchanging knowledge, experiences, successes and challenges.

¹¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General Comment No. 5: General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child", CRC/GC/2003/5, 27 November 2003.

ii. Generation of evidence-based knowledge on children

The objectives

Utilizing the research capacity of the universities, Child Rights Centres will be positioned to generate new knowledge and evidence on the situation of children through a child rights-based approach to the relevant research. UNICEF's research capacity, and guiding principles and standards¹² will promote the application of a child rights-based approach to the research that enhances its quality, ensures adherence to ethical standards,¹³ promotes accessibility, communication and dissemination of research outputs, while encouraging partnerships for research. This approach ensures that research activities respect child rights, including the right to express their views, and benefit the most disadvantaged children by revealing inequities. First of all, the establishment of a child rights-based approach to the research will result in more accurate and rights-oriented research outputs that identify and prioritize child rights issues and better guide actionable and operational response measures. In addition, Child Rights Centres will provide a structure within universities to consolidate and disseminate child-specific research knowledge so that it is made visible and accessible to the benefit of children. The Centres would also have an advisory role on child rights to the operation of universities and their research projects.

The expected outcomes

In that capacity, the expected outcome is that Child Rights Centres will become hubs for knowledge and evidence on children's rights and create a virtuous circle of dissemination and learning on child rights that Parliament, central and local government agencies, and other decision-makers can access to inform their decisions and develop policies that better serve the interests and the rights of children. The generation of qualitative knowledge and evidence on children will inform policymaking and contribute to better planning, designing and implementing child-sensitive and evidence-based interventions, policies, legislation, and decisions related to children at national and local level that respond to their real needs and guarantee the full realization of the rights for all children. Furthermore, the dissemination and communication of research outcomes beyond the academic community will provide the required evidence for targeted advocacy efforts that support the realization of child rights.



12. United Nations Children's Fund, "UNICEF Policy on Research", CF/EXD/2016-003, UNICEF, 2016.

13. United Nations Children's Fund, "UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis", PROCEDURE/OOR/2021/001, UNICEF, 2021.

iii. Teaching and integrating child rights into university curricula

The objectives

Child Rights Centres promote the teaching and integration of child rights as an integral part of the university curricula. Equipping academic personnel with the expertise to integrate child rights into their teaching is the foundation for fostering scientific knowledge among university graduates which ensures that pre-training on child rights is included in core university specialties. Building a high level of awareness about child rights among future professionals through their university education can have a multiplier effect on the social impact of child rights in the long term. The integration of child rights into academic teaching and curricula across different disciplines requires high-quality orientation for university teaching staff. As a response, UNICEF will provide a two-day consultation workshop at each university to establish a Child Rights Centre and will be followed by an in-depth professional development learning programme for university professors and lecturers on how to integrate the child rights dimension into their teaching methods, pedagogical practices, course content and research. They, in turn, will be able to pass on their child rights knowledge to their students and influence their perceptions and awareness of the value of child rights.

The expected outcomes

The main outcome of investing in teaching and in the integration of child rights into university curricula is that university graduates will have the required

knowledge and sensitization regarding child rights to better position them to respect, uphold and protect child rights, both as individuals and as future professionals. In the medium term, this approach may also foster a more participatory learning environment for students, one that actively strengthens inclusion and fights discrimination. This function of the Child Rights Centres is directly linked and contributes to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provision that education shall be directed to "... the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms...".¹⁴ This function also supports the implementation of the provision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a milestone document in the history of human rights, that "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".¹⁵ Both documents lay out the foundations of Human Rights and Child Rights Education, which are also supported by Child Rights Centres.¹⁶ The objective of Child Rights Centres to bolster the teaching of child rights responds to a fundamental requirement for a functional Child Rights Education system – investment in the capacities of schoolteachers. This is expected to specifically benefit pedagogical departments (of pre-school, primary, and secondary education) at universities whose mission is to enrich future teachers with the awareness and skills on child rights required for the effective implementation of Child Rights Education.



¹⁴ Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 29, par. 1.

¹⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 26, par. 2.

¹⁶ Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General Comment No. 1: The aims of education", CRC/GC/2001/1, 17 April 2001, para. 15.

D. The Child Rights Centres' pivotal role in achieving the 'whole-of-society approach'

The Child Rights Centres model builds upon the “whole-of-society approach in promoting and protecting child rights”. This approach is founded on the assumption that society includes a mixture of social structures, institutions, individuals, groups and communities that need to be equally mobilized to effectively uphold child rights. Based on this, every segment of society, such as the central and local government and authorities, Parliament, independent authorities, civil society organizations, international organizations, schools, academia, faith-based organizations, professional groups, the judiciary, media, the diplomatic community, the private sector, and, most importantly, children and young people themselves, is expected to take on their specific role in upholding children’s rights. Establishing an ownership culture of child rights by the entire society ensures a sustainable awareness of child rights that can lead to the change of social norms to the benefit of children.¹⁷ Ultimately, this approach is dictated by art. 42 of the Convention, whereby “states should make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known”, while the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment 5 indicates that a “comprehensive strategy

for disseminating knowledge of the Convention throughout society”¹⁸ needs to be in place. Child Rights Centres can effectively respond to this legally binding obligation imposed by international human rights law on every country.

The reason that UNICEF strategically selected to partner with Greek academia is twofold. On the one hand, universities themselves constitute a critical component of the ‘whole-of-society approach’ while they also perform multilevel functions, such as education and training, research and knowledge generation, that affect the establishment of a child rights culture in society. As universities are among the key agents of socialization of individuals and help to shape their perceptions, Academia’s contribution can have a multiplier effect on the social value and footprint of child rights. On the other hand, universities act as key catalysts for driving the child rights agenda across other segments of society at both central and local level. This can be achieved through partnerships for mainstreaming, promoting and raising awareness of child rights with various actors and stakeholders, in the spirit of the SDGs in general and SDG 17 in particular.



17. Khalil, Ghassan, *Child Rights: The Historical Evolution*, Chemaly & Chemaly, Beirut, Lebanon, 2002, p. 117.

18. Committee on the Rights of the Child, “General Comment No. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child”, CRC/GC/2003/5, 27 November 2003.



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Contact Details:
UNICEF Greece Country Office
Lochagou Spiliotopoulou 8
157 73, Zografou
Athens, Greece
Office: +30 211 2340 297
Email: greece@unicef.org
www.unicef.org/greece