

Celebrating Together the Universal Children's Day and the 30th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Op-ed by the European Union Ambassador to Barbados, the Eastern Caribbean States, the OECS and CARICOM/CARIFORUM, Daniela Tramacere

Every year, the Universal Children's Day is observed on the 20th of November and it marks the day on which the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. This special anniversary gives me the opportunity to reaffirm the European Union's (EU) commitment to protect and to promote the rights of the child, in line with the provisions of the Convention and its Optional Protocols.

As we mark today the 30th anniversary of the Convention, which is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty, I see it as an opportunity to assess the progress made to enhance children's rights worldwide and to reflect on the challenges ahead.

Children's rights are universal, indivisible, and inalienable; and every single child has the right to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment. The Convention inspired the EU to adopt and to change laws and policies aimed at ensuring that all children can fully enjoy their rights. The EU is guided by its principles: devotion to the best interests of the child, non-discrimination, respect for the views of the child, and their right to life, survival, and development. In Europe or in external actions – whether in humanitarian context, in conflict situations, displacement, migration etc. – the Convention guides EU policy, legislation, and financial programmes that have an impact on children's rights.

Caribbean countries were among the first to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and have also signed various other child-related conventions. Every year, the EU cooperates with the Caribbean and Latin American Countries to table resolutions on the rights of the child: during the March session of the UN Human Rights Council and also during the UN General Assembly Third Committee. This year, the themes of the jointly promoted resolutions focussed on empowering children with disabilities for the enjoyment of their human rights, including through inclusive education; and on children without parental care.

The EU's long-standing commitment to the elimination of all forms of violence against all children is mirrored by concrete actions in the region. The EU and the UN embraced the **Spotlight Initiative** that aims to eliminate violence against women and girls. The Initiative is currently under implementation, with programmes in South East Asia, Africa and Latin America, and will be launched soon in the Caribbean.

The European Union works in partnership with a number of partners across the Caribbean to implement programmes that include children and youth under different thematic focuses and sectors, including persons with disabilities, education, health, LGBTI+, violence against women, crime prevention, and human trafficking to name a few. In **Barbados**, the EU is supporting, in partnership with Special Olympics, a vocational training and job placements programme for intellectually challenged persons and youth. In **Antigua and Barbuda**, the EU has funded a vocational training and job placements programme for (incarcerated) youth at risk; and has also supported the **Government of Saint Kitts and Nevis** to run a youth at risk facility. The EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, which I have already mentioned aims to eliminate violence against women and girls, with a national programme in **Grenada** and a regional programme across the Caribbean. The EU has also funded different social crime diversion programmes of the

CARICOM Secretariat across the region, to promote community cohesion and give troubled youth at risk a chance to change positively the trajectory of their lives. As children continue to be trafficked globally, with girls remaining disproportionately targeted, the EU has supported the CARICOM Secretariat to undertake a comprehensive study on human trafficking in the region.

In the area of education, the EU has also supported Caribbean governments in improving access to the primary and secondary levels; and improved participation at the tertiary level. We have also supported the development of policies of special needs education, early childhood education, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) across the region. The EU has also assisted in the development of national qualifications frameworks across the region, which forms the axis of an inclusive, seamless lifelong-learning, educational system.

In spite of these endeavours and progress, there remain serious challenges, unresolved issues, and weak areas that need to be addressed. **Child abuse** remains a significant problem across the region, specifically neglect, physical, and sexual abuse. The region has also been experiencing significant levels of interpersonal conflict in schools and in the wider community and many adolescents report having experienced violence in one form or another. Corporal punishment is still administered to children in schools, although efforts are being made by governments to replace it with other forms of school discipline.

Over the past two decades, Caribbean countries have made steady progress in addressing the issue of violence against children by incorporating the issue into national legislation, criminalising child sexual abuse, and imposing greater sanctions against perpetrators. Governments have developed policies, initiatives, programmes, or actions to combat child sexual abuse and established mechanisms and agencies with responsibility for child protection. Awareness among the public about issues related to child sexual abuse has improved. This helps shatter the silence surrounding sexual violence against children and stimulates governments to develop national action plans to address prevention and manage their responses to sexual violence against children.

As we look towards tomorrow, we recognise that we need to collectively do more to ensure that the rights of the child are engrained within the social and economic DNA of communities, citizens, and those who lead them. We will continue to do our part grounded in our philosophy that protecting the rights of the child protects our future.