

## **Defending the Rights of Vulnerable Children and Youth through Education: A Focus on the Role of Self-teaching and Play**

Testimony for Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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Good Afternoon. Chairman Hultgren, Chairman McGovern, members of the commission: thank you for coordinating this important hearing and for inviting Right To Play to share our experience driving forward an innovative approach to child rights and education; an approach focused on play-based learning. Right To Play is the only global development organization focused exclusively on using the power of play to transform the lives of children and youth affected by war, poverty and disease. We train teachers and coaches to harness the power of play to promote learning and development inside and outside the classroom.

Children are the world's most vulnerable population, experiencing a broad range of rights violations, including being at risk of child labour, physical abuse and sexual violence, frequently lacking access to health care and support services, and critically, lacking access to quality education. While education is a fundamental human right for children<sup>i</sup>, currently 263 million school-aged children and youth globally are out of school. Of these, 75 million live in 35 crisis-affected countries.<sup>ii</sup> For the vulnerable children and youth in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the impact of disrupted education is devastating, affecting their ability to lead a healthy life and reach their full potential. For example, since conflict broke out in Mali in 2012 – which is one country in which we work – the education of over 700,000 children has been compromised.

We are in the midst of a 'learning crisis'. If current trends continue, only one in three children will learn basic primary-level skills by 2030. We need new models – innovative solutions – to cope with this learning crisis. At Right To Play, we believe that a focus on play-based learning is one innovative solution that is both effective and scalable in ensuring holistic child development and promoting education for all.

Play (as enshrined in Article 31 in the UNCRC) is a powerful tool in promoting learning for children and youth and is a major contributor to the development and enhancement of critical life skills that allow children and youth to thrive throughout their lives.<sup>iii</sup> Play transforms dynamics inside and outside the classroom by creating caring, supportive and committed relationships between teachers and students, and positive learning environments, where children feel safe. Our approach also supports children to have a sense of belonging and agency, as well as space to reflect and search for meaning. We do this through our experiential approach to learning, using 'Reflect-Connect-Apply': children *reflect* on the experience of play, *connect* their learning to real-life situations, and *apply* their knowledge to their everyday experiences going forward. In this way, children learn the curriculum, as well as critical life skills, through their experience of play.

Play allows children to be a part of claiming their human rights. Children and youth in Right To Play programs are found to be more involved in leadership roles in their communities, and have stronger levels of self-esteem and well-being. One way Right To Play promotes this is by ensuring children's active participation in our programs: for example, we have promoted child-led programming, creating space for children to design and develop their own learning games that promote and educate children on their rights. We have also supported children to establish and lead in child rights clubs and national youth parliaments. For example, in Mali, our youth regional parliaments have mobilized

the community to address barriers related to education, such as early marriage, corporal punishment and child labour.

The importance of play for vulnerable children and youth in crisis and emergency contexts is particularly significant. According to USAID, sport and play support children, and particularly vulnerable children such as refugees and internally displaced children, to relieve stress, restore a sense of normalcy and heal emotional wounds. At Right To Play, we commissioned a research study of our programming in Lebanon with Syrian refugee children to better understand the link between play and psychosocial support. More than 1 million refugees were officially registered in Lebanon by the end of 2016, with children and youth making up over 50% of this population. Beyond the traumatic experiences of war itself, the strain the refugee influx has on Lebanese society filters down to these refugee children who suffer the additional effects of bullying, social isolation, poverty and a sense of hopelessness. Play can mitigate some of these effects, helping vulnerable children to reclaim an understanding of the world in which hope and joy are central.

Underpinning the use of play in these contexts is the idea that when children encounter stress or trauma, their thoughts can change their feelings, which then influence their actions. Play can reduce the effects of trauma because when a child is focused on play, these positive actions impact their feelings, which help transform their thoughts. For example, in the resource manual for psychosocial support in response to the Ebola crisis, a table shows what specific games to play when children are feeling a particular emotion. If a child or the group is feeling 'despair', a game based on 'trust' can be played, so they can feel 'hope'. If they are feeling 'doubt', a game based on 'purpose' can be played, so they can feel 'confidence'. A positive and negative emotions dictionary helps coaches and teachers understand and communicate these emotions better.

Ultimately, the research and programming evidence clearly points to play-based learning as an innovative solution that is both effective and scalable in promoting education for all. Play also makes sense for children: in all contexts, where the world is rapidly changing, but especially in refugee contexts and crisis-affected communities, play is the most natural form for learning. The US government, therefore, has an opportunity to better respond to the needs and rights of vulnerable children, through a focus on the use of play, in three important ways:

- **First**, increase funding for children's rights and education, through official development assistance for direct aid to basic education, by investing in multilateral partnerships and by funding innovative civil society organizations. Since 2002, the share of education in total official development assistance globally has fallen from 13 to 10 percent. As the largest provider of ODA for basic education, the US must show continued leadership by increasing ODA targeted for education, and especially for fragile and low-income recipient countries. The USA should also continue to show leadership in the GPE, striving to meet its GPE targets in this year of replenishment.
- **Second**, create opportunities to have children and youth voices be part of decision-making, including children from fragile and conflict-affected countries. For example, create spaces for young people to share their perspectives here at Congress and engage youth perspectives in the Congress structure. In this way, children's agency and participation are at the heart of any policy decisions made about them.
- **Finally**, ratify and uphold the Convention on the Rights of the Child, showing global commitment to promoting and realizing children's rights, including the right to education, as well as the right to play. The USA should also support shifts for organizations and other

countries, especially those receiving ODA, to operate from a child-rights based approach. This would have significant benefit for children in the US and around the world.

Children and youth are the future. It is vitally important that we do everything in our power to ensure that children's rights are protected and upheld, including their right to education. Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> As enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 26), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (Art. 28 and 29)

<sup>ii</sup> GEM, 2016; ODI, 2016

<sup>iii</sup> When operationalized, these broader life-skills categories include facets that comprise both individual and social skills - such as critical thinking skills, creativity, confidence, self-regulation, endurance and flexibility, as well as enabling trust and respect for others.

Supporting Children's Development NCAC - [http://ncac.acecqa.gov.au/educator-resources/pcf-articles/Life\\_skills\\_Dec09.pdf](http://ncac.acecqa.gov.au/educator-resources/pcf-articles/Life_skills_Dec09.pdf)