

Advancing Children's Rights Through Advocacy in Ireland

Summary

The Situation

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most complete statement of children's rights ever produced. The groundbreaking human rights treaty established that children have rights. They include the right to education, health, adequate standard of living, protection from abuse and neglect, and equality and nondiscrimination.

Despite the important step, governments on the island of Ireland have failed to fully incorporate the provisions of the treaty into policies and practices.

Atlantic's Approach

Between 2004 and 2012, The Atlantic Philanthropies invested \$28 million in groups in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland advocating for policies and programs meant to advance the rights of children. This work had three key objectives:

- Build a strong body of core children's rights organizations to strengthen the field
- Develop the voice and leadership capacity of communities, families and children, and young people
- Support key campaigns

Atlantic supported six nongovernmental organizations in Northern Ireland and 11 in the Republic of Ireland to carry out this work. Most of the organizations worked with children and young people to support them in advocating for change.

Outcomes

A 2014 evaluation by the University College Cork, Ireland, and Queens University Belfast noted the following outcomes from this work.

- **Authentic engagement with young people and promoting their participation enabled real changes to be made.** For example, VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care) works across Northern Ireland to promote the rights of children and young people cared for away from home. In 2012, the Department of Health set up a working group to support the development of minimum standards for children's homes.

As a member of this working group, VOYPIC encouraged the inclusion of children and young people's views early in the process. VOYPIC conducted workshops with 57 children in 21 care homes and conducted an online survey of children and young people. Young people presented VOYPIC's recommendations from these workshops to the government working group. A public consultation¹, launched in spring 2013, sought out children and young people's views and thus engaged them early in the drafting process.

New Play Space for Children

In the Republic of Ireland, Barnardos' *Amplifying Voices* initiative aimed to amplify the voices of children and young people on issues affecting their lives. The initiative worked with a group of children aged 10-13 who were campaigning for safe play spaces. The children surveyed more than 100 people in their community including parents, teachers and local councillors. As a result of this campaign, Dublin County Council provided funding for a games area (playground) in the community.

¹ Public consultations, which solicit the views of members of the public, give people a chance to get involved in the work of government policy making.

- **Organisations influenced domestic law and policy in advancing children’s rights.** Youth@CLC, a youth advisory panel within the Children’s Law Centre in Northern Ireland, used the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the basis for conducting a survey in 2012 with 965 year 11 students in 13 secondary schools on the use of mental health services and perceived stigma. The group had been concerned that young people were not aware of the mental health counselling services available to them or were not seeking such help.

Findings from the survey enabled Youth@CLC to make recommendations to government on how to improve service delivery. Following this research, Youth@CLC received a letter from the Minister of Education setting out the steps that he and his department would take to address the key recommendations of the Youth@CLC report.

Strong Behind-the-Scenes Influence

The Children’s Rights Alliance, meanwhile, aims to improve children’s lives in Ireland by campaigning for changes in laws, policies, and services using the rights framework of the UN convention. Since 2009, the Children’s Rights Alliance has published an annual report card which aims to monitor the government’s performance in the area of children’s rights. Another important strand of the organisation’s work is its analysis of the government’s annual budget. As part of that effort, the alliance provides guidance and a budget factsheet to its member organisations.

Successive evaluations of the Children’s Rights Alliance have noted significant impacts on influencing government policy decisions in relation to children’s rights. The alliance is seen as having a strong behind-the-scenes relationship with significant policy figures, and has been credited with significantly influencing the government’s decision to appoint a full cabinet minister and to establish the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Children’s Rights Referendum Win

The Children’s Rights Alliance and Barnardos also led the successful campaign in 2012 in which the people of Ireland voted in favour of explicit constitutional recognition of children’s rights. The referendum was important because although the UN convention was ratified in the Republic of Ireland in 1992, a positive vote on the referendum would mean that children’s rights are protected in the Irish constitution and by the Irish courts, rather than just recognised through the National Children and Youth Strategy. The win was seen as having the potential to give advocates greater persuasive power in working with policymakers. Before the referendum was called, Atlantic supported a public education campaign about children’s rights.

- **Organisations used the law to secure change.** Some groups sought to make change through the use of strategic litigation. For example, through calls received from young people on its CHALKY phone advice line, the Children’s Law Centre in Northern Ireland noted that the health and social care trusts were taking an inconsistent approach to their obligation to accommodate homeless children who met specific criteria and, in certain instances, to provide support and care for them until they are 21 or longer if in higher education (up to 23 years).

As a result of these calls, the Children’s Law Centre brought a case on behalf of a vulnerable 16-year-old who had been hospitalized due to a deterioration in his mental health. In the case, the trusts agreed to provide accommodation to the young person. It also revised guidance to all of the trusts and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in 2014 to meet the accommodation and support needs of 16 to 21 year olds. Since the judgment, Children’s Law Centre has provided training to frontline staff and given advice and support to about 30 young people in similar circumstances. The centre has intervened with their local trusts to resolve their accommodation needs without needing to turn to costly judicial proceedings. This was possible due to the precedent set in the Children’s Law Centre case mentioned above.

- **Organisations employed research to enable transformation.** In the Republic of Ireland, for years juveniles accused or convicted of crimes had been housed in an adult prison often alongside violent inmates. The prison not only had horrific conditions but essentially served as a crime school for younger adults. As part of its campaign to end the detention of juveniles in St. Patrick’s adult prison, the Irish Penal Reform Trust commissioned research that resulted in a 2009 report, *Detention of Children in Ireland: International Standards and Best Practice*, which showed how international standards could and should be implemented in practice in Ireland.

Irish Penal Reform Trust's campaign contributed to a government commitment in 2012 to move all juveniles to a children's detention school, which is focused on welfare, education and rehabilitation.

In Northern Ireland, WIMPS – Where is My Public Servant? – was set up by the organisation Public Achievement to help young people identify and contact their elected representatives. In 2011, a WIMPS group of young people established a campaign to end the “punishment” attacks by paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. A residual problem from the conflict has been that paramilitary groups take it upon themselves to dispense justice in local communities. This often means violent attacks including shootings and beatings, most of which are inflicted on young people.

At first young people wrote to politicians but received little response. They then turned to research to bolster their cause. They put in a Freedom of Information request to the Police Service of Northern Ireland to gain more information on the statistics of these punishment attacks. From that request, they learned that only 4 per cent of those crimes led to an arrest of a suspect. Public Achievement provided this information to the media, which covered it heavily. The young people involved in WIMPS provided media interviews and gave their views to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. The campaign led to the policing authority setting targets to reduce this type of violence.

Learnings

- **Language of rights.** There is a definite ambivalence towards both the language and the reality of children's rights in Ireland. Although funded under the children's rights advocacy strand of Atlantic's grantmaking, a number of organisations were not explicitly engaged in children's rights advocacy. Some groups were unconvinced of the value of a children's rights approach in effecting change.
- **Research and training.** Organisations expressed a need for research and training in use of child rights approaches across all levels of the children's sector and the decision-makers with whom they came in contact. Research should include studies to examine the relative strengths of using rights-based approaches as well as investigate areas where children's rights advocacy is needed.
- **Child rights checklists.** Some respondents suggested that children's rights standards and practices need to be distilled down into a manageable framework or toolkit that organisations could use to assess their own children's rights work. This could take the form of a checklist that identifies areas of strength as well as areas in need of improvement within organisations, which would allow organisations to share expertise and resources.
- **Robust collaboration.** There clearly is potential for collaboration among organisations working in children's rights advocacy and a number of successful alliances have been created. While organisations may be keen to retain their own identities, coalitions have proven to be effective and efficient when organisations come together on a voluntary and informal basis around a specific issue.
- **Children and young people's engagement with rights.** One of the key learnings from children and young people was that there was a dearth of information on children's rights that is relevant, accessible, and presented in a child- and youth-friendly format.

Conclusion

The Atlantic Philanthropies grantmaking in the area of children's rights advocacy has had an impact that goes beyond any specific projects. Coming at a time when funding streams were being cut and children's rights were neither seen nor heard about, these grants offered a lifeline to support existing work and inspired a wealth of new approaches among organisations operating in the sector. The funding has strengthened the organisations' capacities to engage in children's rights advocacy and to do so in ways that are robust, innovative and, importantly, involve children and young people themselves.

For more information, on the Northern Ireland reports click [here](#).

For further details on the Republic of Ireland report, click [here](#) and [here](#).

Grantees

Organisations supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies Children and Youth Programme on the island of Ireland

Republic of Ireland

Barnardos – Amplifying Voices

Children's Right Alliance

Community Creates (SpunOut.ie)

Empowering People in Care (EPIC)

Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT)

Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

National Women's Council of Ireland –The Y Factor

Northside Partnership– Young Community Leaders

Social Entrepreneurs Ireland – Young Social Innovators

Stand up for Children

Start Strong

Northern Ireland

Children's Law Centre

Include Youth

PlayBoard

Public Achievement

VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care)

YouthAction Northern Ireland