

Annual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights

Plenary Speech for UNICEF DED and ASG, Charlotte Petri Gornitska

For 26 November 2019, 10.30

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to be representing UNICEF on this panel at this important annual Forum on Business and Human Rights.

Especially this year as the world is celebrating the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most ratified piece of human rights standards existing, and the cornerstone of UNICEF's mandate for children.

The Convention has led to extensive improvements in laws, frameworks, standards, policies and practices globally.

And this is delivering results. For example, the global under-five mortality rate has fallen by about 60 per cent. The proportion of primary-school-aged children out of school has decreased to 8 per cent.

However, there is no room for complacency. I am not going to detail the myriad challenges still facing children, but they remain vast. And new challenges are constantly emerging.

Children's own voices on climate change for example have recently taken centre stage. Children are physically, physiologically and epidemiologically most at risk of the impacts of the climate crisis. Unless urgent action is taken, the worst for many children is yet to come.

Children are not small adults. Body mass, size, biological and emotional growth, patterns of behavior, age and developing capacities shape their experience of issues that impact them. Business impact on children also comes indirectly through issues that affect those who care for them.

The combination of the responsibilities of States to protect children's rights, and of business to respect those rights is central to the theme of this Forum, and indeed the progress to which all of you have been contributing since the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has adopted guidance incorporating the UN Guiding Principles, and, in particular, the Children's Rights and Business Principles. The Children's Rights and Business Principles were developed in 2012 as a corollary to the UN Guiding Principles.

The Children's Rights and Business Principles frame business responsibilities around decent work for young workers and parents; child safety and safeguarding; safe products and services; marketing and advertising; the implications of supply chains; impacts in the community and environment; and, of course, eliminating child labour.

Business activity impacts children in innumerable ways, but human rights due diligence often overlooks impacts on children, often assuming such impacts are secondary to those of adults.

For several years now, UNICEF has been working with businesses and governments to bring action on business impact on children into the mainstream of efforts to achieve the SDGs and business sustainability.

In 2018, UNICEF offices around the world worked with over 2,400 companies to address practices affecting, amongst other things, child obesity and other forms of malnutrition, child protection, health and education—all of which are mainstream focus areas of UNICEF’s technical work. These companies range across multiple sectors—for example, travel and tourism, extractives, garment, mobile phone operation, social media, food and beverage.

But this is a drop in the ocean compared to what is needed. Action to address adverse business impacts on the rights of children needs to go to scale.

Scale will not happen company by company. Governmental action is essential, and in a globalized world the necessity for coherence is imperative.

Let’s take employment policies and practices for example, which have a direct impact on the ability of parents to parent well. Paid parental leave, breastfeeding breaks, child benefits, and affordable, accessible and quality childcare require urgent measures, by States and by individual businesses.

A 2019 survey of over 300 businesses partnering with UNICEF found national legislation and government standards to be the single biggest driver for family-friendly policies by business.

Recognizing the significance of regulation and policy is not about limiting business freedom but about supporting a rights-respecting, forward-looking business environment. Businesses we work with tell us that smart regulation helps them, including by creating a level playing field.

We believe governments can do more to demand supply chain transparency. Perhaps progress has been made in relation to modern slavery, but we believe the approach should be extended to human rights due diligence more broadly, with children’s rights as an intrinsic element.

Regional and global bodies have a huge role to play in supporting coherence between national approaches. Trade and investment policies and agreements are profoundly influential. Only one-third of current regional trade agreements contain provisions on labour rights, and most are silent on issues affecting children.

Elsewhere, the obesity epidemic is leading some governments to impose taxes on highly processed sugary foods. Responsible ministries are incorporating children’s rights provisions into extractive sector due diligence.

Government involvement gives weight to coalitions. UNICEF wants to see more governments playing a visible leadership role in convening the State, business and civil society around addressing business social impact in ways that make children’s rights explicit.

Respect for children’s rights is not a nice to have, but a must to have in any vision of sustainability.

The abuse of children’s rights today is unacceptable on its own terms. It also limits and damages our future society, our collective goal of achieving the SDGs.

We must aim for scale—we need to see States taking leadership, individually and collectively, and working together with business, multilaterals and civil society to make this happen.

Do continue to count on UNICEF to connect and collaborate.

Thank you.