

Child and Youth Statement

**Rebuild better,
Renew commitments
and Re-centre policy around the child**



CRC30 YEARS
CONVENTION ON THE
RIGHTS OF THE CHILD



Kaycee Nimoho and Vanessa John of Vanuatu speak about ending violence against children and creating environments that support mental health and resilience.

Marking the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), children and young people from Australia and the Pacific region meeting in Melbourne identified key areas of concern for governments and policy makers to address. The unexpected arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic a month later ushered in new challenges for children and young people and exacerbated many of the risks and vulnerabilities they already faced.

The top five challenges or issues facing young people are:

- 1. Children, young people and COVID-19**
- 2. Climate change**
- 3. Indigenous children's rights**
- 4. Youth and citizenship**
- 5. Mental health and resilience**

This statement goes beyond identifying problems to offering solutions in the form of "calls to action" that children and young people want governments and decision-makers to implement.

This statement is made in the spirit of progressing children and young people's rights and wellbeing, and the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Imagination Declaration.



Liam from Strathewen Primary School speaking at the conference.

Introduction

This statement represents the views of the children and young people who attended the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Held on 20 November 2019, the conference provided an opportunity to Review progress, Renew commitments and Re-centre policy around the child. Currently, the health, social and economic implications of COVID-19 are reversing much of the progress made for children. This statement is an opportunity to Rebuild better during and after COVID-19, Renew commitments to child rights and to Re-centre policy on children and youth.

Although the CRC is the most widely accepted of all international treaties, ratified by all countries except the USA, many governments fall short when it comes to implementing their promise to children. Over half the world’s children experience violence; 152 million children are working – half of them are doing hazardous work – and girls are still victims of child marriage and female genital mutilation. In Australia, children and young people generally enjoy a good life, but the 2019 Scorecard, published by the Office of the National Children’s Commissioner, shows children’s rights are not widely understood. Anxiety and mental health issues are occurring earlier in children’s lives and increasing numbers of children are exposed to family violence. Many children are removed from home and placed into care. The age of criminal responsibility remains 10 years old and evidence shows that Aboriginal and Torres Islander children are over-represented in the out-of-home care and criminal justice systems.

This statement is a message that children and young people are part of the solution to the challenges the world faces today. It is important for policy makers to consult and listen to the voices of children and young people so that their lived experiences help to inform policy making. The Australian Government should lead a national action plan that enables the voices of children and youth and supports them to stand up for, claim and realise their rights. Governments of Pacific Island Countries too should consult with children and young people and protect and support them to reach their highest potential. The World Bank says one of the smartest investments a country can make is to invest in children and adolescents.

The views presented here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the sponsoring organisations. The CRC30 conference was a collaboration between World Vision, the University of Melbourne, the Child Rights Taskforce and the Australian Human Rights Commission: National Children’s Commissioner.



“Children should be consulted on all matters concerning them, and ALL matters concern children.”

– Mikiko Otani, family lawyer and member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

COVID-19



A family "bubble": staying home and peering at the world behind face masks. The new normal living with COVID-19.

Crises like COVID-19 exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and create new ones.

Since the pandemic, schools have been closed, social life disrupted and children and young people have largely been confined to their homes. Many children and young people are grappling with increased stress, and many caregivers have lost their livelihoods and incomes, limiting their ability to provide for children.

Why is it important to young people? How it affects children in Australia and the Pacific.

COVID-19 has significantly disrupted the education of children and young people. During school closures, education went online and great pressure placed on young people to keep up with their lessons. Not all children, however, have full internet connectivity. Some children are receiving radio lessons, while others have materials dropped off at home. There is concern that student achievement will slide and that not every parent or caregiver is well equipped to supervise or support home learning.

Beth's story

As a student in year 12, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a great source of upheaval and change in my life. Online schooling and exams from home have been a challenge in understanding content and has therefore been a source of much stress in what is already one of the most stressful years we have experienced. However, I am very grateful for the access I have to the internet which has been one of the most useful tools when adjusting to the changed circumstances. For those with poor or no access to internet, continuing a quality education would be very difficult to achieve and many do not have a quiet place to study. Times such as these are greatly disruptive and challenging on all people, including children with limited access to learning resources.

Many young people are employed in the hospitality, retail and tourism industries. COVID-19 lockdowns or limited operations have increased the unemployment numbers of young people.

Jessika's story

The COVID-19 pandemic has made me incredibly uncertain about my future. I live out of home and work casually in retail and as a result my hours were cut down from 25 to 5-10 hours a week as our store had to close. As a student, my applications for support from Centrelink were continually delayed as new programs took preference in processing. My application took nine weeks instead of the usual six to process my Youth Allowance as I did not qualify for Job Seeker as I was still technically employed. This delay put immense pressure on myself both financially and mentally, both from the stress and additionally, that I could not afford sessions with my therapist at a time where I needed them the most.

I, like many of our friends, asked for a temporary reduction in our rent during the period and were dismissed by our realtor and instead forwarded applications for Centrelink, despite having a positive history of always paying rent on time for over a year. I am set to finish my undergraduate degree this year but I am unsure as to whether I should do my masters with the proposed changes in university fees affecting my area of study and concern if either way, there will be a position in my sector for me. I was planning on completing work experience in my sector this year however that has been put on pause with the office working from home which also affects my future employability.

My boyfriend and I both tested positive for COVID-19 a week before Melbourne started its second lockdown. We had been doing all the right things, washing our hands regularly, limiting public transport, leaving the home only for essentials and wearing masks when outside since the original lock down. We weren't at the pub every weekend with our friends or out at house parties; we were just unlucky.

What we were lucky for, is that our symptoms were mild and similar to a common cold. The worse of it was the aches during the first week and migraines which meant we both had to take a week off work to recover. I also lost both my taste and smell which I am yet to recover. We were vigilant, we went and got tested quickly and isolated while we waited for results, the whole thing happened incredibly quickly and felt surreal as I hadn't shown any symptoms and my boyfriend only had a sore throat.

We felt guilty, as our close contacts also had to go into quarantine like us for two weeks in case they developed the virus. I got cleared on Monday, having no contagious symptoms for over 72 hours however I now feel anxious going for a walk or to the shop that I could still spread the virus as there is no test yet to say whether or not the COVID is active or inactive. I am incredibly concerned for my health long term as it is unknown whether I can get the virus again. I am young, but the virus is unpredictable and that doesn't mean it won't be deadly if I get it again.

What do children want to see done?

Potential solutions.

It is important for governments to acknowledge the challenges faced by children and young people and to use their experiences to influence policy. Measures to control the spread of the pandemic should be child and youth friendly, making sure that children are protected from harm and have access to health and social services. Child protection services and social workers must be classified essential and be well resourced to respond to the needs of children and young people during and after COVID-19.

The Australian Government should scale up programs to end violence against children in the Pacific. Children, young people and their families must be cushioned from the economic impact of the pandemic. Young people who are working and living independently should be effectively and expediently supported to meet their day-to-day needs.

Action is needed now to address the pandemic's impacts on children and to stop the echoes of COVID-19 from permanently damaging our shared future. The Australian Government and governments of Pacific Island Countries must make children and young people a central focus of the response and recovery to COVID-19. Investing in children and young people brings a triple dividend of development benefits: it immediately improves the lives of vulnerable children, builds their health, capacity and productivity for future life stages, and lays the foundations for strong development outcomes for the next generation.

Climate change and sustainable environments



A flooded refugee camp in Bangladesh.

Climate change threatens the very existence, health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Severe weather manifesting in Australia’s raging fires, droughts, cyclones, rising sea levels slowly eroding and sinking islands in the Pacific, and changes to ecosystems caused by human consumption are a threat to life, food production and impact negatively on their habitat.

Children and young people want immediate and decisive action from governments to mitigate the negative effects of climate change.

Why is it important to young people? How it affects children in Australia and the Pacific.

In the Pacific, children and young people are a fast-growing population accounting for up to 70 percent of the total population. Children in Vanuatu are witnessing the oceans from where their food comes choking up with plastic which is also destroying sea life. In Australia, some school children have taken the initiative to train to be fire volunteers and are leading fire education awareness programs. It is not only children and young people that are affected by climate change. Their families and communities also experience it. Climate change sometimes means shortage of food, loss of home, parent/caregiver unemployment, or loss of family income and livelihood.



“The most important issues are climate change, pollution, microplastics, that’s a massive problem because we are eating polluted food, and climate change because of this drought we’re having bushfires. Where I’m from, we are trying to tell old people what the problems are from our perspective not like politicians.”

– Jordan Lambert, 14, NSW

“In my community, climate change is my biggest concern ... we’ve gotten our voice out with the strikes, but now we need action because now you are aware of what is going on and how concerned we are. It’s not about having politicians telling us to go back to school but about supporting groups that can help fight climate change.”

– Beth Dewhurst, Year 11 student

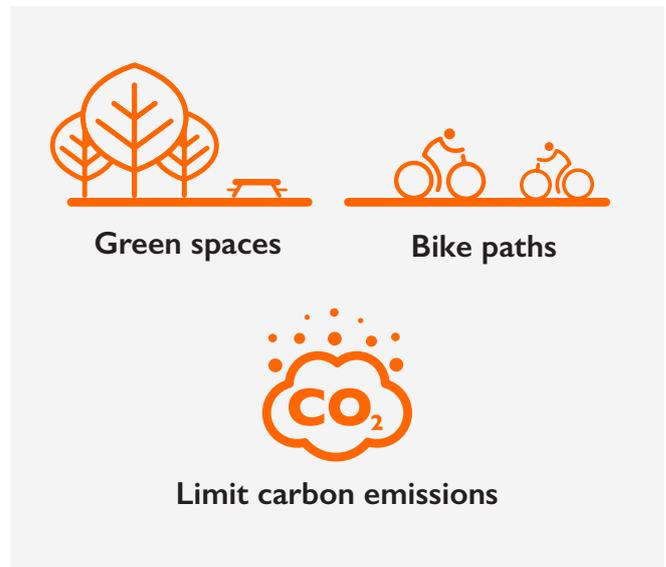
“Each Thursday at 2pm, two teams of students from our group go out to the two set sites in our school ground and take measurements. We measure the moisture in the top layer of leaf litter and the layer below. We check the moisture level in the soil and the earth beneath a piece of fallen timber. We record the air temperature in the shade and check the cloud formation above. All of this information is taken, using specific tools we are familiar with and confident using, and it’s recorded on a special data sheet, which is scanned and sent through to the CFA. We are using our skills and contributing to a real assessment of the daily fire danger risk in our area.”

– Liam Brereton, Grade 6 student

What do children want to see done?

Potential solutions.

Children and young people should be consulted and involved in housing, transport and infrastructure planning. Urban developments should promote nature-based solutions and include green spaces essential for people, animals and biodiversity. Green spaces improve community and are important in flood control. They help to clear stormwater run-off and reduce urban heat during heatwaves. Children and young people want to see more creative safe spaces like foot and bike paths which encourage people to meet, exercise or grow food. The Australian and Pacific Island governments should establish better waste management programs, support recycling initiatives and ban single use plastics. Governments should also create policies that actively limit carbon emissions.



“We all live in a high bushfire risk area and we all need to know how to prepare for the fire season. We go home, after learning all this stuff and talk to our families. We pretty much talk to anyone who will listen. We run presentations each year to share information ... We’ll launch our new short films for this year and talk to the community, and a whole lot of experts who come along, about what we’ve been up to. Each year our film or book is based around getting a message out there to build community understanding of fire danger.”

– Rory Gravette, Grade 6 student

“Our program is all about learning and leadership and building resilience ... This year, we were recognised in the Resilient Australia Awards, with our 2018 project winning the top award in the Victorian Education section and ... with the National Award for Australia.”

– Safari McNamara, Grade 6 student



““Respect yourself, respect others’ is our motto. Policymakers must listen to us. They should involve us and value the ideas, concerns, and hopes of children and young people.”

– Kaycee Nimoho, 17, Vanuatu

Indigenous children’s rights



Sonita, Shaunika and Mikaela embrace in the Pilbara desert in Western Australia.

Australian First Nations children are concerned about discrimination, mental health and lack of voice. Many Indigenous children have at one time or another felt excluded, experienced racism and loss of identity. They have difficulty accessing services, register lower rates of attendance and have lower literacy and numeracy than students from other ethnic groups. Indigenous children experience high levels of family violence; large numbers are placed in out-of-home care often outside their communities and they experience high levels of incarceration. The suicide rate for Indigenous children is five times that of their non-Indigenous peers. Overall, Indigenous children have poorer outcomes than any other group in all areas of wellbeing, health, education and development.



“One in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders between 15 and 19 years of age reported that discrimination is a personal concern.”

– Children’s report, Child Rights Taskforce, 2018, p13

Why is it important to young people? How it affects children in Australia and the Pacific.

Indigenous children have the same rights as any other children. In fact, their unique culture and history are further recognised and protected through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Several initiatives – many of them Indigenous-led – help to build confidence, self-worth and leadership skills among Indigenous children and youth drawing from their Aboriginal heritage, language, and ways of learning and acquiring knowledge.

“When kids are not given opportunities, they get disengaged.”

– Calvin Hunter and Kristen Smith, Derby, Australia

What do children want to see done?

Potential solutions.

The Australian Government must always act in the best interest of the child. The government should take on board advice from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child which recommends adequate early intervention support services be provided to children and families to avoid underperformance in education, imprisonment and separation of children from their families. Child rights, Aboriginal history and culture, and civic education must be embedded in the compulsory components of the school curriculum.

The CRC states that a *“child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up ... in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity ... a child ... who is indigenous shall ... enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language”*.

“I was one of the few Indigenous people in my school, suffered discrimination and felt shame. I felt empowered when I spoke about the issue of reconciliation.”

– Calvin Hunter, West Kimberley, Derby – Impact Club leader



Young Mob leaders from Sydney connect with their culture on a Cultural Exchange trip to Uluru.

“Being Indigenous is something to be proud of. Young Mob has empowered me to teach my language in schools. It’s helped everyone in the program, from being loud and rude to being respectful, keen, excited, a complete turnaround. It’s the cultural connection that helps. It’s boosted my confidence and pride of my culture and identity. I used to be ashamed.”

– Jordan Lambert, 14, Young Mob Program participant, World Vision Australia



Of the 31,800 children in out-of-home care for two years or more, 40 percent were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (2017-18).

– Children’s Rights in Australia: A Scorecard, p23



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 4-17 years accounted for 19.2 percent of child deaths due to suicide between 2005-2015.

– Children’s Rights in Australia: A Scorecard, p23

“We do not want to inherit a world that is in pain. We do not want to stare down huge inequality feeling powerless to our fate. We do not want to be unarmed as we confront some of the biggest problems faced by the human race, from rising sea levels, which will lead to significant refugee challenges, to droughts and food shortages, and our own challenges around a cycle of perpetuated disadvantage. It’s time to think differently.”

– Excerpt from the Imagination Declaration read by James Hood, Year 9

Youth and citizenship

Legal frameworks are important for supporting children and their development.

The CRC defines children as all people under the age of 18 and the UN definition of youth ranges from 13 to 24 years. However, different institutions and services define children and young people in various ways. They have different developmental stages that include adolescence and have significant age-specific needs which must be recognised and considered in policy making. The irony is that children and young people are most often left out of the decision.

Why is it important to young people? How it affects children in Australia and the Pacific.

Children and adolescents are disenfranchised citizens although they are significant users and consumers of local, national or federal government services. However, children are not homogenous and have different developmental milestones and needs that must be considered as they progress to the age of 18. The adolescence phase in childhood is a period of big physical and emotional changes. Adolescents are legally permitted to work and to marry with parental or judicial consent at the age of 16. Regardless of these adult entitlements and responsibilities, youth are considered too young to vote until they reach the age of 18. Transgender children face challenges to seek legal recognition of their gender identity and some children in out-of-home care experience difficulties in accessing their legal identity documents.

Child and youth citizenship is a right, a method, practice and way of life that enables participation in the economic, political and civil aspects of society. The voting age should be lowered to 16 years to enfranchise a key segment of citizens who want to be heard and who will bring a different perspective, unique to their experience as LGBTIQ, out-of-home-care young people or otherwise. Although many children and young people are already engaged in leading or contributing to issues that matter in their communities, the absence or low status of children in the policy making arena is disturbing.

What do children want to see done? Potential solutions.

Children and young people want to be recognised as equal citizens and the age definition of “child” should be clear and consistent with no exceptions. They want to learn about their rights at school.

Children and young people want elected representatives to appreciate the diversity of children and that their concerns and needs are based on context which elected representatives should seek and listen to with respect, recognising their capability to influence, provide solutions, and to be leaders. Structures that support children’s voices at state and federal government and international levels must be established and adequately resourced.

The infographic consists of three orange icons on a light grey background. At the top is an icon of three people with a speech bubble above them, labeled 'Elected representatives'. Below it are two icons: one showing two people with an equals sign between them, labeled 'Equality', and another showing a person with three curved lines next to their head, labeled 'To be heard'.



“Children and young people should be allowed into the decision-making rooms, be able to share their voices and their influences because young people are very smart. We spoke to a lot of young people from 5, 7, 10, 17-year old’s. They were so excited to share their opinion because they were finally asked and they knew we would take those opinions to government. We tend to get stuck in our bubbles of problems - it is hard to answer what matters to young people, so diversity is key.”

– Eva Massey, Year 12 student, UNICEF Ambassador

Creating environments that support mental health and resilience

Evidence shows a large increase in children and young people within the 10-14 age group seeking mental health support. Some of the drivers of mental health issues are bullying, loneliness and anxiety, family violence, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, and discrimination based on race or ethnicity, gender and disability. Asylum seeker, refugee and Indigenous children and young people are more likely to experience exclusion and bullying. Interventions should include culturally appropriate, community driven healing methods drawing on Aboriginal, Pacific and migrant heritage.

Why is it important to young people? How it affects children in Australia and the Pacific.

In the Pacific, girls experience high levels of sexual abuse, with 1 in 10 adolescent girls experiencing sexual abuse.¹ In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death of children and young people² with higher numbers of Aboriginal children and young people committing suicide than any other ethnic group. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, intersex, queer/questioning (LGBTIQ) children and young people face social and legal identity challenges that make them five times more likely to attempt suicide and twice as likely to engage in self-harm than their peers of a similar age. It is important to create suitable and well-resourced environments to support children and young people’s resilience and wellbeing.³

“In the Aboriginal community the problems are suicide, drug and alcohol abuse. To see my mates die of suicide is not easy. Within Derby a lot of their deaths are preventable, and that’s where we should start, it’s a chain generational effect, they don’t have enough role models. The leaders are taking wrong paths, that’s why I hope to change that, stop that cycle, suicide shouldn’t be happening, a lot of them are young people. Incarceration too is a big issue for me.”
– Calvin Hunter, Yamatji and Nginika young person, Derby

What do children want to see done? Potential solutions.

Children and young people want to see programs that support integration, resilience and strong sense of identity, participation and wellness. Sports and outdoor activities are examples in point. Resourcing of appropriate mental health, legal and community services for children and young people and funding for life transforming evidence-based programs proven to promote opportunity, participation and cultural integration should also be improved.



“In comparison to where I was born and raised, Australia is doing good with anti-discrimination and equality. I have seen the opposite coming from a nation raged by war and ethnic violence. Australia has done well, but there is still work to do.”
– Shadab Safa, CMY, student, former refugee from Afghanistan

Mental health services (icon: head with heart) Outdoor activities (icon: person running with ball)

1 Unseen, unsafe, the underinvestment in ending violence against children in the Pacific and Timor-Leste, ChildFund, Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision Australia, 2019
2 Children’s report, Child Rights Taskforce, Australia, 2018
3 Ibid p 46

Rebuild better, Renew commitments and Re-centre policy around the child

The governments of Australia and the Pacific are commended for ratifying the CRC and are encouraged to implement and monitor it fully. The Australian Government and businesses must show leadership at home by establishing a national plan for children in Australia and ensuring Australian Aid helps to achieve the same in partner countries.

Governments and policy makers must prioritise children and youth and put them at the centre of decision making. This means consistently acting in the best interests of children and youth, ensuring that they are informed and consulted on matters that concern them, and enabled to contribute to important conversations in their families and communities. Government leadership is critical to the realisation of children's rights and decision makers should bear in mind that children and youth are part of the solution.

Everyone has a role to play.

**This statement has been formed by the below
children and young people**

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Shadah Safa
Lachlan Seckold
Jessika Swarbrick

Supporting organisations

Australian Child Rights Taskforce, AIME & the Imagination Declaration, Australian Human Rights Commission, Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), Melbourne University, Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN), Strathewen Primary School, UNICEF, World Vision Australia