

BICE special report for 25 years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Africa - The view of **Ghislain Patrick Lessène**

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The Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified quickly by almost all African states. It even inspired an African Convention on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which contains the main points of the CRC, but adapted to the context and the particular problems of the continent (child labor, trafficking, armed conflict, tradition practices such as female circumcision, corporal punishment, forced marriages ...) and offers very practical steps. June 16 was dedicated as the day of the African Child (DAC).

These texts have established a context and an awareness of the responsibility of states and society regarding children. Expert committees have been set up to assess issues specific to child, reports are presented, and States agree to be criticized and advised on measures to be adopted. The foundations exist; therefore, what remains is the effective implementation of child rights.

We are far from this.

In the field of traditional practices and customs such as female circumcision or corporal punishment, we still face the resistance of society. People do not understand why what was good for their ancestors or themselves would no longer be so.

In other areas, such as education or health, which have the commitment of states, we are well below what one would expect. There are still a lot of uneducated children. I would say that in the African provinces, the right to education is theoretical. And where there are schools, there is one teacher for 200 to 300 students, which is impractical.

Also regarding health, the situation is very bad. The life expectancy of African children remains among the lowest in the world. Disease and malnutrition kill, poverty is recurrent. Conflicts decimate populations, and when they do not kill, they cause trauma which makes children, who have often experienced only violence, real timebombs for our countries.

The real problem is the attitude of the majority of African leaders to childhood issues, and that is understandable in light of their personal backgrounds. It is necessary to create an understanding of the notion of the common good or the public interest. The reasons often cited to justify this sad reality are the hostile international context and the problem of debt. But in fact, it is mostly an excuse to mask a lack of political will. In many cases, the resignation of the state leads to its substitution by NGOs, consciously or unconsciously accentuating the phenomenon of disempowerment.

However, there is optimism because things are advancing, despite appearances.

It would be useful now for African governments to conduct a very specific assessment and quantify these 25 years: How many schools established and children educated, how many cultural centers built, how many children vaccinated, how many automatic records of birth, etc.

One of the areas to be developed for the effectiveness of children's rights in Africa would be a greater involvement of religious leaders. An imam, priest or pastor has as much- or often more-

moral authority than political leader. Many of them are also receptive to the organization of training sessions on the theme of children's rights within their denominational structures.

It is also by educating youth on the principles of human rights that there will emerge a future ruling class more conscious of the common good, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Finally, I invite NGOs, especially those that promote cooperation, to reconsider their position in relation to States which are the first actors owing respect to the rights of the child. NGOs are there to support them, while maintaining sufficient independence to be able to tell the hard truths.