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Strengthening the role of young people in the prevention and resolution of conflicts

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Rapporteur: Ms Christiana EROTKRITOU, Cyprus, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development (the committee hereafter) welcomes the report prepared by Ms Inka Hopsu (Finland, SOC) for the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media. This report is particularly timely, as several major conflicts have emerged in Council of Europe member States in recent years, in addition to the long-standing “frozen” ones. Peacebuilding action should be strengthened to help to put an end to the human suffering in these countries.

2. The committee concludes that no peace agreement can be sustainable without the positive involvement of young people, and that the lack of their recognition and meaningful inclusion, limited funding and the shrinking civic space are serious barriers to such involvement. The committee strongly supports the report’s recommendations, in particular with respect to the need for the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes within conflict prevention and resolution. The committee also underlines the importance of encouraging young people to contribute to conflict resolution, through the rejection of violence and gender stereotyped messages.

3. The committee has dealt with several issues related more specifically to children in conflict. The most recent examples include reports on “International obligations concerning the repatriation of children from war and conflict zones,”² “Ending violence against children: a Council of Europe contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals,”³ “The treatment of Palestinian minors in the Israeli justice system,”⁴ “Protecting children affected by armed conflicts”⁵ and “Preventing the radicalisation of children and young people by fighting the root causes.”⁶ The committee is convinced that listening to children and enabling them to play an active and meaningful role in relevant decision-making processes is essential for addressing a broad range of issues related to conflict situations. Furthermore, a report on “Giving a voice to every child: promoting child participation as a foundation for democratic societies,”⁷ which aims to promote child participation in the broader context, is currently under preparation in the committee.

4. With this in mind, the committee proposes several amendments to further reinforce the text.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 14494](#), Reference 4377 of 27 April 2018, modified on 27 January 2020. Reporting committee: Committee on Culture, Science and Education. See [Doc. 15294](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 20 May 2021.

2. [Doc. 15055](#).

3. [Doc. 14894](#).

4. [Doc. 14583](#).

5. [Doc. 14461](#).

6. [Doc. 14010](#).

7. [Doc. 14806](#).



B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 10 replace the first sentence with the following sentence:

“It is essential to ensure that young people are not only consulted, but act as co-creators of the youth, peace and security blueprints.”

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 10, add the following paragraph:

“The Assembly is convinced that not only young people, but also older children/adolescents should have a role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. In addition to young people, children’s views and experiences need also to be taken into account in peacebuilding and conflict-prevention processes, with due respect to relevant safeguarding principles and with a focus on the best interest of the child. Adequate precautions must be taken to protect children from exploitation. Furthermore, there needs to be awareness of power imbalances between the conflicting parties, including those behind the scenes who have a stake in protracted hostilities. There should also be a clear understanding that it is ultimately the responsibility of adults to prevent and resolve conflicts and to protect all of the children involved, regardless of their background, origin or potential role in the conflict. Primary responsibility for the prevention and resolution of conflicts should therefore fall upon adults who must ensure that conditions of peace and security prevail, thus securing the best interests and human rights of children.”

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In sub-paragraph 14.5, replace the second sentence with the following sentence:

“Such a curriculum should include, but not be limited to, relationships and team working, empathy, critical thinking, media literacy, conflict transformation, reconciliation, human rights education, peaceful political participation and inter-cultural dialogue, so that young people may be better equipped to understand the root causes of violence, support peace and ensure respect for diversity in multicultural societies;”

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 14.5, add the following paragraph:

“Promote variety of perspectives in history teaching as a means of addressing prejudice and developing mutual understanding;”

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 15.2 before the words “in non-democratic regimes” add the following words:

“in all circumstances, and in particular in the context of active or “frozen” conflicts, or”

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Christiana Erotokritou, rapporteur for opinion

1. I would like to welcome the timely report by Ms Inka Hopsu. Regretfully, in recent months we have observed several conflicts in Council of Europe member States flaring up, which in some cases resulted in military action or other types of hostilities. I fully support Ms Hopsu’s call on Council of Europe member States to see young people as indispensable partners in any peace process, as well as in any decision-making processes that affect their lives, and I would suggest that this applies to children as well. The Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development is currently working on a report on “Giving a voice to every child: promoting child participation as a foundation for democratic societies” (Rapporteur: Baroness Doreen E. Massey, United Kingdom, SOC). As part of the preparation on this report, we are piloting an initiative on applying child participation in our work. I will therefore not comment on participation issues generally but will focus primarily on issues of direct relevance in the context of the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

2. It is true that the role of young people should not be purely consultative. They must have full ownership of the process, from the beginning to the end. Their enthusiasm, commitment and creativity are valuable resources that need to be nurtured and treasured. The aim of the proposed amendment is to clarify the wording of this important recommendation (**Amendment A**).

3. Today, every sixth child on earth is affected by armed conflict.⁸ These children are involved in hostilities, be it as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators of violence. Demonisation of the people on the other side of the conflict and the moral decline resulting from the harshness of life in situations of conflict, can have a devastating impact on the child's personality and chances for success in future life. At the same time, children often have an amazing capacity for recovery, if they are supported and protected and have opportunities for education and re-integration. Moreover, due to their personal experience they can have an insight into the inner makings of conflicts and of what it takes to resolve them. It is therefore essential to associate children, particularly adolescents with any peacebuilding initiatives. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that children are particularly vulnerable to manipulation and instrumentalization. They may underestimate the potential risks of their actions and lack the ability to cope with excessive levels of stress. Relevant safeguarding mechanisms are therefore essential. Furthermore, unrealistic expectations should be avoided: powerful and conflicting interests are often at play, which are often disguised as ethnic, religious or other disputes and are extremely difficult to tackle. It is also essential to stress that ultimately it is the responsibility of adults to resolve conflicts (**Amendment B**).

4. I could not agree more that education plays a crucial role in equipping children and young people with competences for the prevention and resolution of conflicts. I also think that to resolve any conflict it is important to understand its root causes. For this, media literacy and critical thinking skills are essential. Children and young people need to analyse information from various sources, engage in debates and explore controversial viewpoints in a safe environment. Children also need to understand what war is and what consequences wars have and be aware of the type of dilemmas that people in wars can come across. In this way, their commitment to peace, sense of justice and skills for conflict resolution will be strengthened. The Council of Europe has developed many useful tools that can be of help, such as a manual for teachers on "Teaching controversial issues,"⁹ "Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People Children"¹⁰ and "Compasito – a manual on human rights education for children."¹¹ The International Committee of the Red Cross has produced the "Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL)" resource pack for teachers, which analyses real life situations in armed conflicts, helps in understanding different perspectives and promotes respect for life and human dignity.¹² Finally, I think that it is indispensable to stress the importance of learning to live together with people who are very different to us, be it the way they look, the way they act or the way they think. Being able to accept "The Other", and to have a respectful dialogue with people with whom we have no affinity on the topics that hurt is a *sine qua non* of sustainable democratic societies (**Amendment C**).

5. It seems to me that learning from history is essential for any peacebuilding efforts. Regretfully, our history is built – to a great extent – around conflicts. Be it World War I and World War II or the Cold War, conflict is an integral part of human nature. It cannot be erased entirely, but we can learn to manage it better. Institutions such as the Council of Europe were set up exactly for this purpose. It is deeply symbolic that the headquarters of the Council of Europe are located at the epicentre of what used to be, for centuries, a devastating military conflict, on the border between France and Germany, two countries that have fought many wars over this particular piece of earth. Do we need new lessons of this kind? Or have we had enough? We can learn so much from the mistakes that our ancestors have made, as well as from their peacebuilding successes. We should also acknowledge that building a peace-oriented memory of conflict can be difficult and sometimes painful. Between truth, justice and peace, reconciliation is a long process in which young people, supported by adequate policies, have a crucial role to play. I would therefore like to welcome warmly the

8. www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/child-protection/children-in-conflict .

9. <https://edoc.coe.int/fr/droits-de-l-homme-citoyennete-democratique-et-interculturalisme/7738-teaching-controversial-issues.html>.

10. www.coe.int/en/web/compass.

11. www.eycb.coe.int/compasito/.

12. Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) is a resource pack for teachers to introduce students aged 13 to 18 to the basic rules of international humanitarian law (IHL). It was designed by the International Committee of the Red Cross in close association with the Education Development Center, Inc. The learning materials are based on real-life situations and show how IHL aims to protect life and human dignity during armed conflict and prevent and reduce the suffering and devastation caused by war. By studying the behaviour of actual persons and the dilemmas they experience, young people begin to understand the need for rules during war and the complexity of their application. They also acquire an understanding of different perspectives and an interest in local and international events, opening the door to active participation in the life of their community. www.icrc.org/en/document/exploring-humanitarian-law.

Committee of Ministers decision last year to set up the Council of Europe Observatory on History Teaching in Europe.¹³ I hope that this Observatory will play an important role in supporting this kind of learning.¹⁴ Furthermore, a relaunch of the intergovernmental program on history education needs to address the question of the resolution of conflict. In the recent past, through these programmes, the Council of Europe has produced promising material on history teaching in Cyprus and in the Black Sea Region countries,¹⁵ which we can build upon, and published e-manuals on “Developing a culture of co-operation when teaching and learning history”¹⁶ and “Shared histories for a Europe without dividing lines”.¹⁷ One important feature of these programmes is the concept of “multiperspectivity”, which highlights the importance of being aware of different perceptions and interpretations of history and the need for on-going dialogue¹⁸ **(Amendment D)**.

6. We have seen with the violent attack on the United States Capitol in January this year how fragile our democracies are. In Europe, as well, violent conflict has again become a gruesome reality, and human lives are being lost on a continent that had said “Never Again” after World War II. The violence and intractability of Europe’s conflicts demonstrate vividly that to protect our common values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, we must remain vigilant and not take for granted the social prosperity and political stability in our countries. Furthermore, today we are observing growing unrest in our societies due to the social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The danger of encroachment on civil liberties and human rights is also very real. In this context, it is important to stress that safety is always under threat in societies in conflict, and that young people and children are particularly vulnerable. I fully agree with the Rapporteur that the Assembly should further reflect on how safe spaces of peacebuilding, democracy and human rights could be secured. I would suggest that this recommendation should relate to all countries, with a special emphasis on those with active or “frozen” conflicts **(Amendment E)**.

7. Whilst underlining the substantial role that young people must have in efforts regarding conflict prevention and conflict resolution, it is of paramount importance to stress the need for young people to be taught from a young age that international law, human rights and the rule of law, as also reflected in pertinent UN resolutions and decisions, must be respected and implemented at all times and in all circumstances. Conflict prevention and peace-making efforts cannot be effective, as long as flagrant violations of international law, human rights and the rule of law, which are the main cause of conflicts, persist. Therefore, the first point must be our shared responsibility to ensure that children and young people can live in a more just and secure world, where these values and principles prevail. The second point pertains to adequate education, so that children and young people demand respect of their fundamental rights to life, dignity and security and promote the implementation of the said values and principles, and the third point lies in our duty to give children and young people the necessary space to do so and to substantially contribute to peace efforts.

13. The Observatory will not only conduct studies on the ways in which history is taught, but its mission as an Enlarged Partial Agreement – amplified by a growing membership – is to ultimately impact the way young people understand relationships of events in time, so that they can appreciate cause and effect, change and development: www.coe.int/en/web/education/observatory-on-history-teaching.

14. www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/observatory-on-history-teaching-in-europe-a-new-flagship-project-of-the-education-department.

15. www.coe.int/en/web/history-teaching/the-black-sea-initiative.

16. <https://rm.coe.int/developping-a-culture-of-cooperation/168071506a>.

17. www.coe.int/en/web/history-teaching/an-electronic-e-book.

18. “History teaching should not try to deliver definitive answers, but to provide an understanding of the complicated historical processes. Present-day history teaching should reflect the full complexity of this discipline, including controversial and sensitive issues, but, at the same time, avoid creating or reinforcing images of enemies or give pretexts for new confrontations.” Council of Europe (2005), “Multiperspectivity in Teaching and Learning History”: www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/compendium/-/asset_publisher/V117nfhFNH6d/content/multiperspectivity-in-teaching-and-learning-history-2005-?_101_INSTANCE_V117nfhFNH6d_viewMode=view/.