

The Pacific Regional Consultation on the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Monitoring and Reporting, August 97

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The Pacific Regional Consultation on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Monitoring and Reporting was held 26th–29th August 1997 in Suva, Fiji and hosted by the Forum Secretariat. The Consultation was attended by over 80 delegates from thirteen Pacific Island Countries and international guests from Australia, Thailand, Barbados and Russia. The Consultation was organised by Unicef Pacific, Child Rights ASIANET (a regional information network on Children’s Rights based in Bangkok, Thailand) and the Regional Rights Resource Team, (RRRT) based in Suva.

Key resource people for this Consultation included: Judge Sandra Mason, (Chairperson) and Professor Yuri Kolosov, (Vice Chairperson) of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn, from the Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University in Thailand and Executive Director of Child Rights ASIANET.

Ana Tabutabu, 13 years old and one of the opening speakers, spoke passionately of her dream where people are treated equally and can live peacefully together. She spoke of those children less fortunate than herself whose parents could not afford to send their children to school and the obligations of parents and governments to protect children from anything that damages or limits children’s potential.

The Consultation aimed to develop participants’ understanding of the CRC, particularly in the area of monitoring and reporting on the provisions of the Convention. In addition,

the Consultation was an opportunity for participants to share ideas and experiences in planning, implementing and evaluating programmes that are designed to improve the overall well-being of children in the Pacific.

All independent countries served by the Unicef Pacific and Unicef Papua New Guinea Offices have now ratified the CRC. States Parties of the CRC are obliged to submit an initial CRC report to the UNCRC two years after ratification and then every five years thereafter. Four countries, (Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Marshall Islands and Vanuatu) have already submitted their initial CRC reports and the UNCRC has reviewed the Fiji and FSM reports. Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga, Palau, Samoa and Niue are due to submit their CRC reports in 1997. In addition, Papua New Guinea was due to report in 1995.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child consists of 10 elected members who are experts in the field of child rights in law, medicine, politics, church, journalism, development aid work and social work. They are elected on individual merit rather than as representatives of their countries. The aim of the Committee is to help countries meet the implementation, monitoring and reporting requirements of the CRC. The Committee works with governments and other organisations in a spirit of co-operation to monitor progress on CRC.

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Highlights of the Consultation include the following: “Key Challenges to the Reporting and Monitoring process under the CRC” was presented by Judge Sandra Mason, Chairperson of the Committee on Child Rights and Mere Pulea, Senior Lecturer, University of the South Pacific, expert in Family Law, who has reviewed the current laws and legislation in a number of Pacific countries in light of the CRC.

“Our Rights, Our Views” Reflections from Fijian Children; a number of children’s presentations on a number of issues raised by the media that concern children in Fiji such as child abuse, children as victims of divorce, abandoned babies,

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corporal punishment and access to education and a review of their case studies in relation to the provisions of the CRC. "Parents cannot afford to pay all the fees the school requires in order to keep their children in school. For example, earlier in the year there were cases where students were sent home from school because school fees weren't paid. Some parents could not honestly afford to do so because of poverty or lack of resources" says Manasa Baledrakadraka, aged 13.

Panel Discussion on Report Preparation: Experiences from the Pacific; Fiji, FSM and Solomon Islands reported on their experiences in preparing initial CRC reports and their experiences to date in implementation of the provisions of the CRC. "We had to be honest with our failings" said Nazhaat Shameem, Chairperson of Fiji's Children's Coordinating Committee (CCC), in preparing the Fiji's initial CRC Report. The task of compiling this Report required the commitment and free time of a multidisciplinary team from government and non-government agencies.

Greg Dever, Chair of the FSM Presidential National Advisory Committee on Children stated that the single most important step to improve the health and well-being of FSM children was to provide universal access to primary health care. "The main cause of childhood death is not diarrhoea or respiratory infections but disorganisation" he told the participants. It is still easier to send an adult overseas for heart treatment costing \$US 50,000 than to get 50 cents worth of penicillin to a child who needs treatment to prevent long term heart disease, living on the outer islands.

In light of media attention on paedophilia in Fiji, Sandra Chestnutt, of ECPAT (End Child Prostitution Pornography and Trafficking) Australia, shared the advocacy work of this NGO with the participants of the Consultation. ECPAT Australia was launched in 1992 as part of a campaign to end child

prostitution in Asian tourism. In 1996 ECPAT Australia launched a global campaign against child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.

The Consultation was closed by Mrs Seruwaia Hong-Tiy, Minister for Information, Women and Culture who reiterated the children's concerns for their welfare and sense of insecurity in a world where many children are ill-treated and abused. She stressed that a critical area that needs to be addressed is in our 'Culture of Silence.' "Traditional Pacific societies are generally noted for keeping silent over controversial issues," she said in her concluding address, "...our respect for one another, our fear of bringing disrepute to our families will only worsen the problem."

Professor Muntarbhorn reminded participants that obligations to the Convention are "until forever!"

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Research has been called good business, a necessity, a gamble, a game. It is none of these – it is a state of mind.

Martin H. Fischer

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