

## SCR Travel Bursary

# CHILDREN AT THE HEART OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Giammarco Di Gregorio

Supported by the SCR Travel Bursary, Giammarco Di Gregorio attended the Children at the Heart of Human Rights Summer School at Geneva University, Switzerland.

It is 8.45am on a blue-sky day. Dressed in a yellow shirt, time is running out while I'm rushing around the streets of Geneva looking for the university campus. Google Maps isn't working. I'm late. Excellent! I let go, calm down, and eventually ask for directions. I'm here, at 9.05am, running through the Uni Mail building. Wow: the ceiling glass and its reflection form a rainbow. Move! It's late! Room MRO60, ground floor. OK - here we go. There is still a free seat. I squeeze, I smile, I sit silently: the welcome session is just starting. My mind is filled with dreams of changing the world, and I'm already drifting off into thoughts, planning, and questions. I'm not happy with myself for drifting off. But I moved through it. Great first day!

The next day was very different. The lecture began with a heartening citation: "if we care about children's lives, we should rather identify what obligations parents, teachers, and indeed the wider



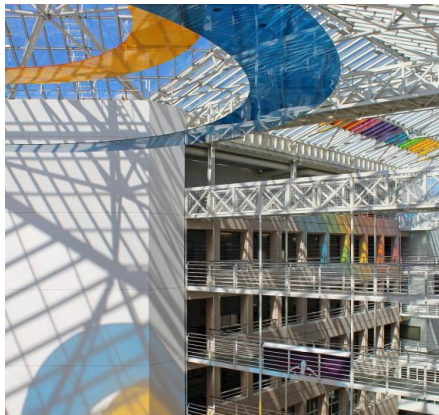
community have towards children" (O'Neill, 1988). I smiled. I felt like I was in the right place and learning to write the questions down as they came; I was settling into really being present. The lecturer was Dr Nevena Vučković Šahović, and I loved her warm personality and authentic passion about child protection. She explained to us the origins, historical background, and main contents of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), one of the most comprehensive of the human rights treaties. Since the UN General Assembly adopted it in 1989, all nations, except for the USA, have ratified the UNCRC making it the most ratified convention in history - a global promise to all children to respect, protect, and fulfil all their human rights.

Walking back to my flat, the sounds of traffic fell away. The global endeavour we'd been talking about made me feel hopeful and encouraged me to do more; it reminded me that our role is to protect all the children and young people we meet every day, ensuring they feel safe and valued and take actions when this is not the case. They really are at a greater risk of abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, and trafficking than anyone else on this planet. I was reminded that when we meet a child, we may be the only approachable person in that child's life, so it is so important that we all take time to actively listen to them and report any concerns. I am drifting off

into questions again: If child protection is everyone's responsibility, can we ensure and monitor the implementation of the UNCRC on the ground? If so, how?

We soon found out that there is indeed a way to monitor the legal obligation to implement the CRC that States Parties have. Dr Roberta Ruggero and Dr Jean Zermatten described the details of these monitoring mechanisms, which require States to submit reports every 5 years and an international body of 18 independent experts (the Committee on the Rights of the Child) to periodically supervise compliance. In line with article 45(a), the review of States' progresses, requires the committee to also review several independent reports submitted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other UN bodies, NGOs, Independent National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and children themselves. These complaints about the violations of rights are significant for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of State's initiatives to fulfil their obligation.

I started being familiar with all these weird abbreviations: CHR, HRC, NGO, OP, OPAC, OP3-CRC. Yes, I hated them, but I was



on it! We visited several NGOs, including Child Rights Connect and World Organisation Against Torture (WAT), and numerous UN agencies, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). WOW! What a wonderful first-hand experience of the work that these organisations carry out every day to improve the lives of millions of children around the globe. We observed working sessions in action and had the opportunity to ask questions and network with world-leading experts in children's rights policies.

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### **We can build a better world if we're willing to work hard together, across different disciplines and cultures**

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Over the next 10 days, we worked in groups of 5 to draft an optional protocol to address a gap or weak legal provisions in the CRC - a treaty that complements an existing human rights treaty. It was fun and we learnt so much! The exercise encouraged us to engage with the Convention more critically and consider the potential controversy that the optional protocol could raise among member States. It was an invaluable opportunity to reflect not only on the effort it takes to draft even the smallest unit of a human rights treaty, but also to see the challenges faced in the attempt to reconcile the convention with cultural relativity and the diverse historical, cultural and social backgrounds we all bring to the table.

I could endlessly write about the incredible endeavour occurring within and between these humanitarian organisations: promoting access to justice for children, employing strategies to develop evidence-based approaches



to child migration, and the international cooperation aiming to eliminate any form of abuse, neglect, exploitation, torture, and detention among children. However, the most transformative experience during the weeks at Geneva was realising that we can build a better world if we're willing to work hard together, across different disciplines and cultures. Achieving a worldwide convention to recognise the rights of children hasn't been an easy or linear success story, but rather a cooperative cycle of failures, understanding, and innovations. Although there is still a lot of work to do, through interminable macro-level monitoring processes, the priceless contribution of many people has made the world a better place for children since the first Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1924.

Sitting quietly on the Airport bus, my thoughts start bubbling up. I wonder what I'm doing here and what I could contribute to the community based on what I'd just learnt during this experience. Each of us has the opportunity to make differences big and small, to somehow tackle the world's injustices and to cultivate a sense of care towards those who are suffering. It is about choosing every day to serve

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### **How can I be of use? Where will I make the largest impact?**

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others and reconcile it with our personal interests and privileges. What can I do to improve human conditions and empower young people, especially the most vulnerable? How can I be of use? Where will I make the largest impact?

I was able to rethink what my role could be in society and I rebuilt my ambitions more meaningfully. I spent the following 4 months researching the biographical narratives of children and young people growing up in alternative care, in order to understand the impacts of institutional care on their development, wellbeing, and academic achievements. The evidence was overwhelming: at each phase of life, there was a significant achievement gap between them and all other children. In 2019, UNICEF estimated that 2.7 million children were in institutional care globally. Consequently, I set up the "Towards my Future" project with the intention to understand these causes and provide an empirical framework to design, implement, and evaluate interventions aimed to reduce such gap. In March 2020, my research project was selected to be awarded the 2020 Laidlaw Scholarships in Research and Leadership at Durham University, and will allow me to research how to enhance the academic achievements of children growing up in alternative care.

My heartfelt thanks go out to everyone who helped me in this experience (including Susan, Diana, Sarai and Sam). I have grown in understanding and become more aware of what kind of impact I want to have in the world and what actions I need to take to actually make that difference. Geneva made me brave and encouraged me to think big and go faster. I met so many good people there. Their dreams about making this world a better place has kept alive my own dreams and my conceptualisation of purpose and impact. Everything was a heartening reminder that I am not alone in my mission.