

Vision statement on children's rights

June 2012

This 'vision statement' on children's rights reflects the vision of the Children's Rights Knowledge Centre (KeKi), and serves as the basis for KeKi's internal priorities as well as for the interaction with 'external' actors from research, policy and practice. It was generated from a broader 'reflection text' on children's rights.

The vision on children's rights cannot be detached from KeKi's basic goals, or from the principles on which its daily activities are based. Therefore, these goals and activities are clarified before the vision on children's rights is outlined.

1. MISSION

The Children's Rights Knowledge Centre (in Dutch abbreviated as *KeKi*) aims to gather, make available, disseminate and stimulate scientific knowledge on children's rights.

2. PRINCIPLES

KeKi's mission is translated into concrete objectives based on the following four principles:

Scientific

KeKi grounds its activities in the results of scientific research.

Interdisciplinary

KeKi maintains an interdisciplinary perspective in its approach of children's rights. This does neither exclude the realization of unidisciplinary studies or trainings, nor does it hinder future steps being taken towards a transdisciplinary approach.

Critical-emancipatory

KeKi adopts a critical-emancipatory approach towards children's rights. This implies that the basic principles of the concept of children's rights are being examined and its possibilities and limitations explored (*critical*). Children's rights are also seen as a potential lever to change the social relations in our society towards more human dignity (*emancipatory*).

Balance between involvement and distance

The children's rights debate mostly emphasizes the question on how to better implement the rights of the child (*implementation*). Less attention is being paid - also academically - to the meaning of children's rights and the tensions presenting themselves in the children's rights discourse (*reflection*). This discussion between implementation and reflection aligns with a tension between involvement and distance. In its approach of children's rights as well as in its daily activities, KeKi aims to reconcile these two positions. This allows for being involved while maintaining room for critical reflection.

3. GOALS

KeKi has three strategic objectives:

1. Meeting forum for scientists

KeKi aims to centralize all expertise on children's rights available from the Flemish university associations. It actively promotes interuniversity and interdisciplinary cooperation between academics, for instance through the organization of research seminars.

2. Contact forum linking research, policy and practice

KeKi functions as a contact forum between researchers, policy makers and practitioners. It makes scientific knowledge about children's rights available for policy and practice.

3. Policy advice

KeKi prepares policy notes on subjects related to children's rights. These policy notes may be issued at the request of the Flemish government or on its own initiative.

4. TOWARDS A BROAD VISION ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Differences in existing perspectives take a central place in KeKi's vision on children's rights. KeKi aims to provide opportunities for dialogue and debate between and about different approaches regarding children's rights. Doing so, KeKi will add to a more differentiated view

on children's rights. Some of the basic principles used as the foundation for such a 'broad vision' are:

Voice of children and youth

A broad vision implies first of all that the input of children and young people themselves is taken into account: what are their ideas and opinions regarding children's rights?¹

Children

KeKi acknowledges the relativity of the definition of the 'child' as a concept, and makes the demarcation of childhood a topic of permanent reflection. This reflection applies to the beginning as well as to the end of childhood.

Childhood - child images

Rather than seeing childhood as a purely biological status, KeKi (also) perceives it as a social construction. Child images influence the shaping of childhood and *vice versa*. Since child images are dependent on context, discourse and perspective, different child images usually co-exist.

A balanced approach of autonomy

Autonomy of children can be interpreted as the individual responsibility of children. Such a (rather negative) interpretation of autonomy does not sufficiently take into account that people - children as well as adults - never act completely autonomously. After all, a fundamental interdependency exists; autonomy can only be realized in relation to others. In its approach towards the concept of autonomy, KeKi is aware of this interdependency.

Children's rights

Children's rights are (fundamental) standards directed at the realization of social justice and human dignity for children. Children's rights should therefore be interpreted as 'human rights of children'.

i. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Optional Protocols

KeKi recognizes the importance and the innovatory character of the CRC and its protocols, as well as its 'limitations'. The decisions that were made regarding which (children's) rights are to be included in the conventions and how they should be formulated, are often influenced by political, cultural, religious, ideological or other interests. Therefore, these

¹ However, KeKi does not conduct its own empirical research about children and youth's visions on children's rights.

decisions cannot be considered neutral. Since almost all states ratified the CRC, the included children's rights are now applicable as minimum standards.

ii. Broader than the CRC

Children's rights are broader than the rights described in the CRC. First of all, specific children's rights can also be found in other universal human rights conventions as well as in legislation at the regional or national level. KeKi bases its approach on this broader formal perspective on children's rights.

Secondly, it is possible to identify children's rights that do refer to the fundamental principles of social justice and human dignity and that are applied as such in social practices, but that are not formalized in human rights instruments. The use of a rights-based language can have an effect in itself, even if this does not (or not yet) lead towards the inclusion of the claimed right in a legal instrument.

iii. Children's rights as human rights

Children's rights are inevitably connected to human rights. When the rights of a child and the rights of others (other children or adults) are to be realized simultaneously, a balance between these different rights needs to be maintained.

Limitations of children's rights

From its critical-emancipatory point of view, KeKi explores the limitations of children's rights. One of the addressed issues includes whether and how children's rights do in fact add to the well-being of children. From its critical and questioning position, KeKi does not take the added value of children's rights for granted.

Consideration of diversity and context

KeKi takes into account the diversity of contexts in which children live and, consequently, in which children's rights need to be realized. KeKi thus emphasizes a contextual interpretation and implementation of children's rights, meaning that standards, depending on the context, may be applied in a different manner. However, contextuality should not be equated with relativism, or an '*anything goes*' attitude. Neither should contextuality lead to the idea that children's rights do not apply to *all* children, or only for *some* children.