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**Independent Children's Rights Institutions: Their Contributions to Human Rights of
Children**

Agnes Lux, PhD

In 2019 the world celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) on the 20th of November, which has become one of the fastest and most widely accepted human rights treaties in the world. It is almost universal, as the only exception is the United States of America. The rights convention gave birth to the idea of a “global child”, a status to be protected under the age of 18 that obliges states and adult society from South Africa to Norway, Japan to Chile, to protect children, help them develop and participate in decisions that affect them. This effort is not a matter of choice, not a cherry-picking game or charity. However, looking over the last 30 years of the Convention, we see that although clear progress has been made in recognizing children as entities with their own rights, news of violations that come to light on a daily basis, exploitation, child labor, deprivation, discrimination, the struggle for survival for millions of children, are everyday realities in the signatory states.

As guest editor of this special issue of *Societies Without Borders*, I welcome articles from three former children’s ombudspersons, Iceland’s Margret Maria Sigurdardottir, Greece’s George Moschos, and Norway’s Reidar Hjermand. Their articles offer insights from the crucial experiences they have gained not only as children’s ombudspersons, but as leaders of children’s rights and innovative practices in laws and policies. This special issue welcomes articles from Sara Imanian and Nigel Patrick Thomas, Roberta Ruggiero and Karl Hanson, Brian Gran, and my own work, academics whose research offers insights into the work of independent children’s rights institutions. This collective body of work represents a significant step forward in scholarship concentrating on children’s rights, especially the roles of independent institutions that monitor the implementation of children’s rights.

We start with the good opportunity of inviting former ombudsmen for children from different parts of Europe to offer their insights on independent children’s rights institutions. By their very nature, these essays are personal and offer unique perspectives on the work of independent children’s rights institutions. After all, these three contributors not only were children’s ombudspersons, each is a leader in the work of children’s rights. Margret Maria Sigurdardottir, the former Ombudsman for Children in Iceland (years), writes about her experiences and expectations as an ombudsman, as it was her “dream job” and about their huge efforts to involve young people and educate them about their work.

George Moschos has written not only about his 15 years of experience as former Children’s Ombudsman of Greece (years), but also about the establishment of the institution. He highlights the importance of “networking”, to establish various networks, as it was one of the basic methodological principles in the exercise of the Children’s Ombudsman’s mission to promote institutional and attitude changes nationwide.

Reidar Hjermand, the former Ombudsman for Children in Norway (2004-2012) shares his experiences of being in the “front line” as an ombudsman, as an influential public office holder. During his work, some changes were hard to make, and the most controversial topics were usually on issues that are perceived to invade the private sphere in a non-legitimate manner. He believes no Ombudsman will have an automatic legitimacy just by having the position. Trust and respect are earned every day, and are lost quickly if the unique position is not used as intended: to be the most important champion for all children in the country.

Sara Imanian (Cumberland Council, New South Wales) and Nigel Patrick Thomas (University of Central Lancashire, UK) revisit the main theories and models of children’s participation, followed by a review of the purposes and methods of working of independent children’s rights institutions (drawing on their own research, which included a survey of members of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children). They also look directly at the potential for dialogue and mutual empowerment, with examples from the second phase of their research, a case study of practices in two institutions.

Roberta Ruggiero (University of Geneva, Switzerland) and Karl Hanson (University of Geneva, Switzerland) explore the positioning of ICHRI between the local and the global, especially regarding trends towards decentralisation of state structures as well as relating to two-way translations of human rights. The article looks at how ICHRI can be conceptualised as institutions that stand ‘in

the middle 'between local and global human rights perspectives. The main idea is that, since their creation, independent human and children's rights institutions have been particularly constructive to facilitate a *two-way dynamic between local and global* perspectives on children's rights, especially in decentralized states.

Agnes Lux has written an article about the child-friendliness of the independent children's rights institutions. Based on the guiding principles of the UN CRC, the best interests of the child have to be taken into primary consideration and the right to be heard is a fundamental human right for children. These rights usually are strictly examined through investigations and researches of the ICRI. But are these right defender institutions defending these rights also during their own work? In this brief paper, she examines the requirements of being a child-friendly and participatory ICRI through a three-elements comparison of European ombudsman institutions.

Brian Gran (Case Western Reserve University, United States) writes about children's ombudspersons in the United States. In the one country whose national government has failed to ratify the UN CRC, offices of children's ombudspersons have been established across nearly half of the fifty U.S. states. This essay compares these offices to membership criteria of ENOC, the European Network of Children's Ombudspersons. ENOC is a guiding force when it comes to children's rights and independent children's rights institutions. Ultimately, Gran recommends a national independent children's rights institution for the United States.