

History of the Children's Rights Alliance

The Children's Rights Alliance is a coalition of almost 100 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working to secure the rights of children in Ireland, by campaigning for the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the UN Convention). It aims to improve the lives of all children under 18 years, through securing the necessary changes in Ireland's laws, policies and services.

Establishment

In 1993, a year after Ireland ratified the UN Convention, 11 non-governmental organisations concerned with children's welfare came together to explore how they might work with one another to promote its implementation in Ireland.

Between December 1993 and January 1994, a research study, funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, was carried out to examine the degree of interest in setting up a long-term NGO-sector initiative in relation to the UN Convention. As a result of the findings of this research, the Alliance was formally established in March 1995 with the election of a Board and the adoption of a constitution.

Core Aims

At its first General Meeting, the Alliance members agreed the core aims of the new organisation. These were to:

- Promote the implementation in Ireland of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- Press for the establishment of an Ombudsman for Children; and
- Promote awareness of the UN Convention.

Early Years

During its first four years, the main focus of the Alliance was the examination by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child of the Irish State's First National Report under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 1997, the Alliance published *Small Voices, Vital Rights*, a comprehensive Shadow Report to the UN Committee; this report was based on consultation with its member organisations and with individuals and groups who had expertise in specific areas, as well as analysis of documentary material.

The UN Committee invited the Alliance to make an oral presentation at the Committee's pre-session meeting on Ireland, in October 1997. At the plenary hearing on Ireland's Report by the UN Committee, which took place in January 1998, the Alliance informally lobbied Committee members and provided information and updates on key issues.

In November 1998, the Alliance held a major conference to highlight the recommendations contained in the Concluding Observations of the UN Committee and to explore their implications. In his opening address to the conference, the then Minister for Health and Children gave a commitment to prepare a National Children's Strategy, as recommended by the UN Committee. The conference was also addressed by Sandra Mason, Chairperson of the UN Committee at the time of Ireland's hearing.

In relation to its second aim – the creation of an Ombudsman for Children in Ireland – the Alliance commissioned the first-ever Irish study to document the key features of offices of ombudspersons for children

or of children's commissioners in a number of countries, and to put forward initial proposals for an Irish office. The study was undertaken by Mel Cousins and the project advisory committee included Michael Mills, who had been Ireland's first Ombudsman. The report, *Seen and Heard*, published in September 1996, proposed that Ireland should establish an Office of Ombudsman for Children, on a statutory basis, with powers both to promote awareness of children's rights and to investigate individual complaints. Following publication of the report, the Alliance continued to lobby for the establishment of a Children's Ombudsman and, when draft legislation was published, it provided detailed comment on this. Following passage of the legislation, the Alliance commissioned a further study to bring forward proposals for priority issues for the new office.

With regard to awareness-raising, the Alliance received statutory funding in 1998 to undertake an awareness-raising campaign in relation to the UN Convention. This funding, which amounted to £100,000, was used to commission a short animated cartoon advertisement for broadcast on television and in cinemas; leaflets and posters; an information pack, and a dedicated telephone information line. The cartoon is still in use by the Alliance and is available on You Tube and to download from its web site www.childrensrights.ie.

History of Membership

The membership of the Alliance grew rapidly in the first few years of its existence: its first Shadow Report to the UN Committee was submitted on behalf of 65 member organisations. Since its formal establishment in March 1995, the Alliance's membership has grown to almost 100 non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Its membership, from which Board Members are elected at the Alliance's AGM, consists of a diverse range of groups, including:

- Child welfare agencies and service providers;
- Child protection groups;
- Academics;
- Youth organisations;
- Family support groups;
- Human rights organisations;
- Disability organisations;
- Parent representative organisations;
- Community groups; and
- Other organisations interested in children's rights.

With the growth of its membership, the Alliance has proven its ability to facilitate a large and diverse range of organisations to work together to promote the rights of children. The Board of the Alliance is elected by its membership and since the establishment of the organisation has been characterised by both change and continuity. New members, representing diverse organisations, have continually joined the Board, while a number of the original members have served for several years.

The Alliance's policies, projects and activities are developed through ongoing collaboration and consultation with its member organisations.

History of Funding

The initial funding of the Alliance was provided by grants from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Howard Foundation and Barnardos, which also provided the Alliance with office accommodation and access to services free of charge. With its limited resources, it was in a position to employ only one staff member – a co-ordinator.

In 2000, the Alliance received significant funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies, as well as funding from the

Irish Youth Foundation. Subsequently, it also obtained substantial statutory funding under the grants programme for national anti-poverty networks and under the federations and networks programme established following the publication of the White Paper on the Voluntary Sector. As a result of its improved financial position, the Alliance was able to rent its own office accommodation and expand its staff, to include a Chief Executive (December 2001), a Policy Officer, and an Education and Communications Officer.

In 2007, following successful funding applications to The Atlantic Philanthropies, the One Foundation and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, to support the 2007–2011 Strategic Plan, further staff members were employed; in 2011, staff members include a Chief Executive, Policy Director (Deputy Chief Executive), Communications Director, Office Manager, Information Officer, Research and Policy Analyst, Research and Policy Officer, and a part-time Administrative Assistant.

Existing core funding of the Alliance will end with the impending cessation of both the One Foundation (2013) and The Atlantic Philanthropies (2016); furthermore, the Alliance has already experienced a cut in its funding from statutory sources, and a further reduction in funding from these sources is possible. Since 2010, the Alliance has been working towards developing a strategy to ensure funding sustainability.

Recent Years

The Alliance has traditionally pressed for reform in legislation and services affecting children across a wide range of issues, doing so by means of written submissions, oral presentations to Oireachtas All-Party Committees and consultative meetings, and commentary before and after the Government's annual Budget. The Alliance has also undertaken innovative work in relation to the development of models for consultation with children and for facilitation of children's participation in the development of policies affecting them.

In 2003, the Alliance became a member of the Community and Voluntary Pillar of Social Partnership which gave it more direct access to elements of the policy-making process. The Partnership Agreement, *Towards 2016*, concluded in 2006, and included a number of commitments in relation to children, and, most significantly, it explicitly recognised Ireland's obligation to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. No other international human rights treaty ratified by Ireland was mentioned in the Agreement.

In May 2006, the Alliance submitted its Second Shadow Report, *From Rhetoric to Rights*, to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The report was a comprehensive review of developments in regard to the implementation of the UN Convention in Ireland from early 1998, when the first examination of Ireland by the UN Committee took place. The Shadow Report was accompanied by a Children's Report, based on a series of consultative meetings with children. In June 2006, Alliance representatives met the UN Committee during its pre-sessional meeting on the Irish State's report and in September 2008 it attended the formal hearing on Ireland's Report, and continued its engagement with members of the UN Committee. The Second Shadow Report is considered to be the 'bible of children's rights issues' for many journalists in Ireland and continues to be relevant in 2011 – five years since its publication. The Third State Report to the UN Committee is now almost three years overdue; when it is submitted the Alliance will once again prepare a Shadow Report and will actively engage with the UN Committee during the examining process.

The Alliance has been calling for constitutional reform in respect of children's rights since its establishment, and has made this a key objective of its work. It has been broadly successful in its efforts, with all political parties committing to hold a children's rights referendum and in the last three 'Programme(s) for Government'.

The Alliance has also advanced its policy work in a number of areas by working in collaboration with other organisations, including as member of the End Child Poverty Coalition, the former CADIC coalition, the Irish

Youth Justice Alliance and as a co-ordinator for these bodies. From 2007 onwards, and with an expanded staff, it has developed new groupings and relationships, together with new, stand-alone pieces of work. Recent collaborative partnerships have emerged, with the establishment of the Children's Mental Health Coalition, Saving Childhood Ryan, Action for Separated Children in Ireland (ASCI); in addition, the Alliance was chosen as the Irish partner for The Body Shop's 'Stop Sex Trafficking of Children and Young People' global campaign.

The most recognised piece of stand-alone work in recent years has been the successful Children's Rights Report Card Series, which examines the Government's performance in relation to its own commitments to children in the areas of education, health, material wellbeing and safeguarding childhood. This has become a valued resource for the NGO sector, public officials and the media.

The Alliance has also played a key role as a member of the National Children's Advisory Council and was the only NGO to be invited by the Government to become a member of the Monitoring Group in relation to the Ryan Report Implementation Plan.

Overall, the public profile of the Alliance developed steadily from its foundation but increased considerably from 2006 onwards, with much of this credited to the work of Senator Jillian van Turnhout, Chief Executive from 2005 to 2011. Alliance media releases and statements receive widespread coverage, and it is now well-established as a contact point for journalists covering stories concerning children. The new strategic focus of the Alliance for 2011–2016 demands that the organisation build on this solid foundation and seek to increase its public profile through media relations, particularly in relation to the campaign to strengthen children's rights in the Constitution.

Strategic Planning

In 2007, the Alliance secured multi-annual funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies, the ONE Foundation and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to support a Strategic Plan 2007–2011. The Plan proved successful in helping the Alliance to maintain a clear strategic direction during these years, as evidenced in the evaluation conducted in 2010.

Work on the Strategic Plan 2012–2016 began in March 2011 and the Plan was adopted by the Board of the Alliance in October 2011.