



Human Rights Preparadices

Louder for the people in the back: Small voices need to be heard too

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Abstrac: Adults get to exchange opinions at conferences. Children do not have the same opportunity to express themselves. Nevertheless, they deserve to get a child-friendly seat at the table, have a say and be heard. Their perspectives might be different, but that might make it even more valuable.

In a globalised world that is dealing with the consequences of climate change and is trying to lower its carbon emissions, it might seem ironic and counterproductive to travel and fly to another country for a two-day conference on human rights. So, I was quite hesitant when I flew from Bilbao to Vienna to participate in the [Fundamental Rights Forum](#) 2024 of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights ([FRA](#)). The FRF brought together important stakeholders from many areas of life that overlap with human rights: politics, organisations, civil society, tech companies, academia.

Conferences as a place for hope?

This being my first conference, I was unsure of what to expect of hundreds of privileged people coming together to talk about old and new topics. In times of the internet and platforms like Zoom, we have millions of ways to exchange ideas and look for new incentives, so why make the effort to travel? But throughout the two

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days in Vienna, I recognised that conferences may not only be about meeting the people, or having the conversations and listening to the panel, but they may also be about creating a feeling. The feeling of being together and fighting together. The feeling of not being alone. The feeling of hope. Somehow, this realisation shaped my perspective. In the field of human rights, where we focus on the violations and harm that takes place globally, we need a place to foster hope. My generation, people born around the 2000s, is known to be very sceptical, sometimes hopeless. Critical of institutions, global actors, politicians. Whilst this can be helpful in pressuring and motivating stakeholders to do better and bringing change into old systems, it can also cause frustration when it feels like everything remains unchanged. Even more, when protests are merely used to defer the narrative instead of creating sustainable change that is so urgently needed in many areas. Growing up in a world where people need to [flee their homes](#), [COVID-19](#) isolated others, and [populist movements](#) are rising internationally, times do not always feel easy or hopeful. This might be an argument in favour of conferences like the FRA Forum 2024. People need places to unload and find like-minded people. Something to create a feeling of belonging and foster a bond with hopeful goals. An opportunity to see closer what other people do and how things can move forward in the right direction if you just bring the right people and ideas together. Ray Bradbury once said in an [interview](#) 'Action is hope. There is no hope without action', and I think conferences can serve as a reminder that action is taking place. However, the people most affected by the impacts of climate change, war and pandemic, might not be the people awarded the privilege to access them and speak up.

The importance of gentle voices

During the [first thematic panel](#) of the forum, the European Ombudsperson [Emily O'Reilly](#) said that *we have to be concerned when the loudest and most violent voice is heard instead of the most gentle*. This raises the question how to best make sure that gentle voices are listened to. After all, it is hard to get the attention of the audience and receive a seat at the table, especially when one is not loudly demanding it. But a loud voice should not equal better, smarter, or more likely to succeed. It simply is louder.

It is a privilege to be heard, although it should be a basic right

Narratives are shaped on behalf of the people that are deemed more vulnerable, but are they really vulnerable, or is this perspective just laid on them? This was one of the questions raised at the forum [human rights table 2](#) on 'shaping a socially and economically sustainable Europe'. Speakers talked about how one can stay hopeful when the mere attempt of participation is denied, when your voice is neglected and ignored? Young and less privileged people are experiencing this phenomenon a lot.

In this regard, one might argue that the Internet is a major platform to be heard, but the actual spaces for engagement within civil society are [shrinking](#) as populist discourse and rising extremism in many parts of Europe and around the world create an unwelcome, even [dangerous, atmosphere](#) for activism and empathic encounters. Although the internet provides platforms and opportunities, it also gives space for people to be violent, uncontrolled or organise hateful actions. The verbal violence and hate speech experienced online regularly transforms into 'real' violence outside of the internet. I want to raise another perspective. One major group was not represented at the conference: children. People spoke about human rights for Europe's future and the importance of future generations, and the forum aimed at having 30 percent of participants below the age of 35, but children and youth did not get to speak. We can recognise that it is important to have people with years of experience who speak and take the stage. Children do not have the same channels to speak and the same audiences that listen to them – maybe because their voices seem gentle, infantile, and inexperienced. During the forum [Lisette Ma Neza](#) took the stage with her impromptu poems. She said we are 'open doors and friends at the forum'. Regrettably, the door for children remained closed in this relevant context. Societies succeed in highlighting the importance of children, speaking about their best interests or utilising child-friendly mechanisms, however they often fail to include children's voices themselves. Now, one could raise the question as to how children could be included in conversations on difficult, graphic or even violent topics. Under the best interests of the child principle (as enshrined under the UN [Convention](#) on the Rights of the Child), such inclusion is not always possible. However, participation for children does not have to look the same as participation for adults. Child-friendly options can look different and should be adjusted to create the space for being heard but remain protected. For example, Greta Thunberg has shown with [her protest](#) and school strike for the climate how children have strong opinions and want to stand up for important societal issues. Thus, the questions should not be if they are able to deal with heavy topics, but in which ways conferences can create better access. Greta has shown that when we talk about children, we also mean teenagers and youth, people who are affected by climate change, fear of the future, digitalisation and new technologies on very real levels and whose capabilities and motivation are often underappreciated. It would merely be logical to include children and representatives of and for children in the conversation. After all, these are the generations of the future. Generations of the future deserve to have access to the room of the next forum edition in ways that make their participation sustainable to take away the same hopeful feeling that I was able to experience at the FRA Forum 2024. Young generations deserve hope. They deserve to see that there are people fighting for human rights and that they deserve to be heard as well.