

Preamble

Children and Young People: Agents of Change

“Every child counts! Together with children, we assert their rights worldwide. Whatever the situation - climate change, child labour, war and displacement - we empower children and young people and, with them, spark changes locally and globally.”

That is how terre des hommes (tdh) defines the organisation’s mandate in 2023. This mandate underlines the need for wide-ranging structural changes at the local and global levels, even after decades of international development-policy work. At tdh we contribute to making necessary changes finally become reality and guaranteeing the complete implementation of children’s rights worldwide. The corresponding strategic direction is developed jointly by children and young people, project partners, tdh members and staff.

As a **child rights organisation** we focus primarily on the basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): protection, provision and participation. Accordingly, all children and young people worldwide have a right to **safe spaces** for themselves, to **access services** to meet all their needs and to **participate in decisions** on issues affecting them and their lives. In addition, the CRC emphasises that all children and young people have the right to grow up in a healthy, nonviolent environment in which they can develop their abilities without hindrance. This comprehensive approach makes the CRC an essential reference document for our work. In view of the urgent challenges on the world scene, however, it needs to be continually developed in a dynamic way. Central issues to consider and enshrine in it should reflect the real lives of the children and young people all over the world; examples are environmental rights or rights concerned with digitation.

At the same time, as an **international child rights organisation** we operate in the tense societal and political area of development policy that raises questions regarding distribution structures for resources, decision-making and capacities. In our work with children, young people and partner organisations, particularly in the Global South, we always have to avoid and dismantle unequal structures.

Against this background, the present paper embeds our work with children, young people and project partners worldwide in the challenging global conditions of the 21st century and stimulates critical reflection on our position and role.

Changing perspective: What challenges do children and young people see?

At the beginning of the 21st century, global society is faced with a host of crises that massively restrict the implementation of human and child rights. The reasons for this are, for example, violent conflicts or the consequences of the climate crisis. Yet large numbers of people and population groups in some parts of the Earth are much more strongly affected than others by the negative impacts and feedback loops of war, violence and the climate crisis.

At the global level, this asymmetry reflects the patterns of colonial powers and of distribution in the global economy. However, these patterns are also reflected to some extent in international development policy: decision-making power in the Global North, exploitation and dependencies in the Global South. Yet we also see structures of unequal distribution at the local and interpersonal level. Power gaps prevail, for instance, between elites and marginalised groups, between genders or between adults and children and young people. At all levels, these inequalities always go hand-in-hand with the curtailing of human and child rights.

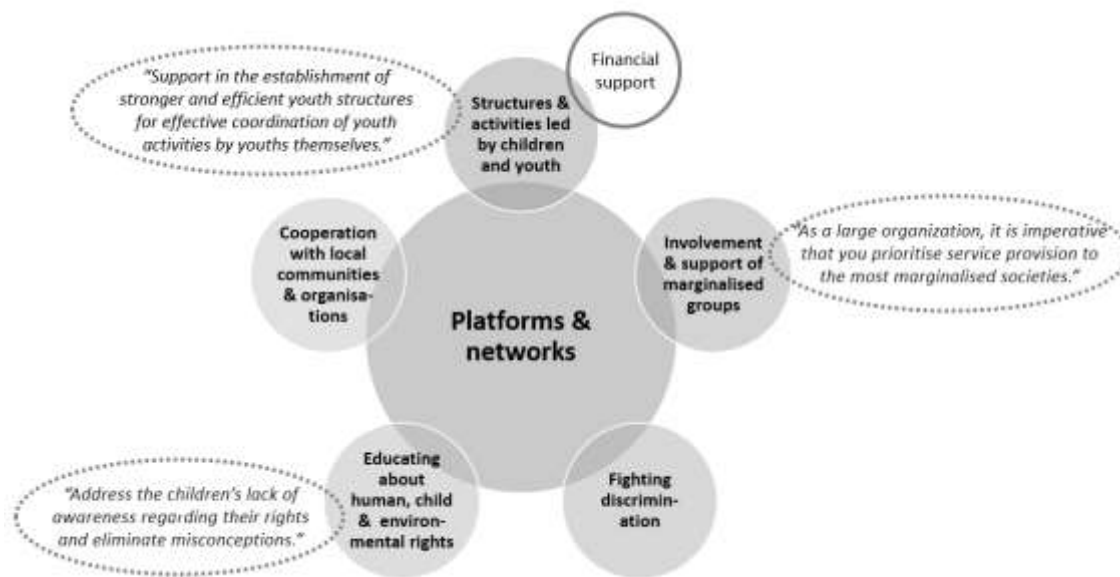
Children and young people all over the world clearly notice these restrictions on their rights and actively oppose them as best they can; they call for the strict implementation of their rights. In order to give them active support, tdh tries to understand the view of children and young people, and recognises it. That is why - when it comes to the worldwide implementation of child rights - we focus on the Top Five central challenges compiled by members of tdh's International Youth Network:

1	<p>Lack of involvement of children and young people in decisions and processes affecting themselves. They are denied the ability to participate in a purposeful way.</p> <p><i>“My major concern is about disjointed participation of children and young people.”</i></p>
2	<p>Lack of access to information and opportunities to assert their rights and to improve their individual economic situation.</p>
3	<p>Discrimination and exclusion of children and young people, e. g. based on their gender identity and sexual orientation, their socio-economic position, ethnic origin, religious orientation or disability, which denies them access to their rights.</p> <p><i>“Discrimination poses a formidable obstacle ... This discrimination can create barriers for them when it comes to accessing education, employment, and other opportunities.”</i></p>
4	<p>The climate crisis with its negative consequences, which are threatening human life and income opportunities and leading to movements of mass migration with their own perils and challenges.</p>
5	<p>Governments that neglect the needs of children and young people and hence refuse them access to their rights.</p> <p><i>“Government[s] ... are not ready to listen to the voices of youths, so our complete physical, mental and social development cannot be guaranteed well.”</i></p>

The above challenges listed by the young people clearly point to violations of the CRC's fundamental principles. They experience a clear **restriction on their opportunities for participation**, feel that provision in various areas of life is inadequate and perceive a **threat to safe spaces** in which they can develop their potential without hindrance. In terms

of their commitment to oppose these largely systemic challenges, the young people have likewise described the support they wish to see from tdh.

They repeatedly focus on **expanding existing platforms and networks** or setting up new ones. These platforms and networks will then serve as a basis for all further support programmes.



Addressing these perspectives and wishes seriously means that tdh places children and young people, their welfare and their interests at the centre of all decision-making and all actions. That way we can, with them and at the side of civil society movements, advocate worldwide for the comprehensive implementation of child rights.

The response of terre des hommes: How do we support children and young people?

For the members and staff of tdh all over the world, the above challenges and wishes give rise to two major cross-sectoral themes - working on them will contribute to reducing and avoiding violations of child rights:

1. **Promoting peace and protecting children and young people from every kind of violence.**
2. **Fighting all forms of discrimination and oppression, together with children and young people.**

In the tdh impact logic, these topics can be located at the **meta level**. This level foresees a societal transformation which we always focus on as a long-term goal. However, this transformation can only come to pass with the aid of gradual changes, which we place at the intermediary outcome levels. At these levels, we

- initiate structural changes by drawing attention to violations of child rights by advocacy and publicity (**macro level**),
- build and expand civil society networks and platforms as collective structures (**meso level**),

- support children and young people in their actual life contexts through projects - together with our partner organisations (**micro level**).

To carry this out, the Delegates Conference - which brings together young people, project partners, tdh members and staff for participatory discussion - describes the current thematic priorities in the form of **Strategic Goals** valid for five years. For the 2023-2028 period these are

1. Education and Empowerment for Life Perspectives
2. Access to Rights for Children in Contexts of Migration
3. Young Environmental Voices
4. Gender Justice to Live in a World Free from Gender-based Rights Violations & Discrimination.

In this way, we create strategic structures enabling us, in solidarity with children and young people, to stand up for their rights. These structures are shaped by **participation, partnership and localisation**. As in the CRC, participation also plays a central role in tdh's work with children and young people. We see their participation as a driving force for the above-mentioned necessary changes. That is something we have noticed for years in our programme activity, but also in how children and young people thoughtfully embed the situation of implementing their rights in global challenges. In the next few years, tdh will be tasked with fostering existing capacities and enabling **safe spaces for empowerment** for children and youth to voice their concerns, claim their rights, and have their perspectives incorporated in laws and policies. In this context, we understand ourselves as accompanying an **emancipatory process** of children and young people.

Spaces free from violence and exploitation comprise a core element for all strategic goals. Such safe spaces play an important role for child and human rights defenders as well as survivors of any form of violence. Thereby, they empower themselves to **promote non-violence and peace**.

Besides these relations with children and young people, the next few years will see us attaching great importance to making our relations with project partners even more participatory through partnerships and localisation. tdh is basically in the role of a donor organisation which gives rise to a power gap between us and our partners. We constantly reflect on this position in order to **'unlearn' the power structures** that have been continually reproduced since the colonial era and to establish partnerships genuinely based on equality. Through political advocacy, we in Germany contribute to getting other actors too, from politics and civil society, to question and **break down global power asymmetries** and so to participate in reducing the social, ecological and economic exploitation in countries of the Global South.

Our programme activity is therefore founded on participation, partnership and localisation. Children, young people and project partners define local solutions for problems that concern themselves and their access to rights - from the level of individual projects right up to advocacy at the national and global levels. Together we rely increasingly on **alternative and innovative solutions** since familiar development-policy approaches have so far brought only limited success. Worldwide we are seeing the establishment of such alternatives in order to combat locally oriented, unequal decision-making power and

distribution patterns. Examples are ‘Buen Vivir’ which is widely recognised in Latin America or ‘Radical Ecological Democracy’ in South Asia.¹ Owing to their origins in certain natural and cultural regions, these alternatives are not easily transferrable but they can inspire us to feed new ideas into our joint work with partner organisations. However, we have to realise that locally oriented approaches may sometimes contradict the ideas of necessary changes that we have gained from our European socialisation, because the actions of all of us are rooted in specific sociopolitical structures. We seek common solutions to these contradictions in intercultural dialogue.

To sum up, it can be said that the global community is today on the brink of disaster in view of the constantly growing **ecosystemic chaos in the global capitalist system**. Nevertheless, we are encouraged by countless numbers of children and young people engaged in initiatives launched by a critical civil society. We have confidence in these small but many drops and challenge ourselves to do a better job of linking up these initiatives, projects and programmes. When drops run together, they turn into a stream and set the flow of necessary changes in motion.

¹ Detailed information on these matters may be found in an [extensive study by the partner platform and youth network in Latin America](#), as well as in Reader 2 and its [summary](#) produced by the Alternative Development Theme Group.