

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE LIGHT OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS WITH PARTICULAR REGARD TO HUNGARY

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UDK: 341.231.14-053.2:504=111
Pregledni rad
Priljubljen: 22. 11. 2022.
Prihvaćen: 15. 12. 2022.

ABSTRACT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is based on human rights, and children's rights need to be interpreted in this context. As the 2030 Agenda declares that the sustainable development goals seek to realise the human rights of all, it is important to include and interpret the rights of the child as a part thereof.

The comprehensive and ambitiously worded goals in the Agenda for Sustainable Development are difficult to transpose into any binding conventions or tools in the area of human, and thus especially children's, rights. One goal could be to manage these goals and targets within the existing international framework of law and children's rights. Children's rights are a comparatively new branch of law. The rules pertaining to the special, vulnerable situation of children were first written down approximately 100 years ago. At the time, the only goal was the survival of the child: feeding, clothing, and medical care. The content of rules and regulations has gradually broadened, and now children's rights are considered one of the most progressively developing areas of human rights.

The purpose of this study is to closely examine the legal regulations, conventions, studies, publications, essays, and historical descriptions pertaining to children, and to examine the degree to which they deal with the role of the natural environment in the life of the child, and how

KEYWORDS:

children's rights, natural environment, healthy life, environmental education

these regulations recognise and necessitate the essential role played by the natural environment in the physical, spiritual, intellectual, and moral development of children. One of the main pillars in this process is environmental education, or Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and considering the current social circumstances, it is both necessary and expected to promote the ESD to the greatest extent possible. Taking the above into account, it can be seen that the provisions stating children's rights do not clearly and unequivocally deal with the importance of the constant presence of the natural environment, while the right of the child to have fresh air and be raised in a natural environment is not suitably emphasised, even though it is an essential condition for the healthy physical, spiritual, intellectual, and moral development of the child.

INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the children of today spend an unhealthy amount of time indoors and alarmingly little in the open air. In a study conducted by Persil, encompassing a number of countries, 12,000 parents were asked about how much time they used to spend outside as children and how much time their own children spend outside, shedding light on the dismal facts: all around the world, 56% of children spend less than 1 hour outdoors (Robinson, 2018). That is less time than recommended for prison inmates. The reasons are no doubt clear to all of us, ranging from the overly extensive use of “gadgets” to inadequate security, from bad weather to the tiredness and apathy of parents. According to experts at the WHO (Regina Guthold, Gretchen A. Stevens, Leanne M. Riley, Fiona C. Bull), 80% of teenagers are not sufficiently active, which is an alarming figure. (Guthold, Stevens, Riley & Bull, 2020).

Spending time outdoors has a myriad of positive effects, which has been proven by studies, surveys, and scientific research. To name just a few: spending time outdoors is the best way to relieve stress (Sobko, 2019), it strengthens the motor and immune systems, improves our ability to cooperate, our creativity, imagination, and observation skills, reduces problems with vision (Mingguang et al., 2015), and, last but not least, teaches us to love and respect our natural environment. It is impossible to live a healthy life without spending time outdoors, in nature.

As the natural environment seems to have taken such a back seat in the lives of today’s children, which has now become a serious threat to their physical and mental health, the question arises as to how this impacts children’s rights today. At what level does law govern this essential issue?

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN’S RIGHTS

“The story of childhood is a nightmare that we are just starting to wake up from” (DeMause, 1975). DeMause says that the farther back we go in history, the lower the quality of care we provided to children, and the higher the likelihood that children were murdered, cast out, physically abused, terrorised, or

sexually assaulted. According to the author, the history of children is a slowly upward trending developmental process that starts with the murdering and casting out of children, mainly infants, continues with their gradual acceptance, and heads in the direction of a child-centric attitude.

In ancient times, the ritual of child sacrifices, rooted in the ideas of a cult fertility, played a part in the cultures and belief systems of very many peoples, who believed that God wanted a share of gifts for himself. It was common to hold hostage the children of enemy families, and even to murder them.

Béla Pukánszky (2001) points out that this question is much more complicated, with numerous sources citing that the sympathy felt towards children was in certain cases apparent even in antiquity: artefacts to this effect have been found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece, whereas in ancient Rome children were much more vulnerable.

In general, little sensitivity was shown towards children in the Middle Ages. Child mortality rates were quite high during the period, and parents responded by protecting themselves behind a veil of apathy. As a result, children were considered independent and part of adult society as soon as they could survive without the care of their mothers or nurses (Faix, 2016). The father decided the fate of the child, over which the mother had no say.

Childhood as a separate stage of a person's life started appearing at the beginning of gentrification, around the 1840s. That is when parents and schools started devoting attention to raising and educating children (Faix, 2016).

The first steps in the development of children's rights were taken in 1919, when the International Labour Organisation adopted the Convention concerning the Work of Young Persons Employed in Industry, followed by its Minimum Age (Agriculture) Convention in 1921 (About the ILO). Most child labour took place in an agricultural environment, often in a natural environment or outdoors. This meant that children could become acquainted with the natural environment, relations, and phenomena, and based on their observations and experiences, they could figure out their effects on themselves.

In 1919, Britain's Eglantyne Jebb created a foundation called *Save the Children Fund*, with the aim of providing aid to children ravaged by World War 1. She established the Children's Charter, which was submitted to the League of Nations and then adopted in 1924 as part of the Geneva Convention, laying out the fundamental rights that ensured the welfare of children (Faix, 2016). Her plan was to create a preventive system that would protect children instead

of saving them (Makai, 1997).

The declaration sets forth the fundamental rights in five points which, according to Janusz Korczak, are more suggestive than demanding (Korczak, 1929; 1995). Although none of the five points specifically names the importance of the natural environment in the life of the child, it is my belief that the first point covers its necessity. The first point reads: “The child must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually”. (Over time, the translation of this statement has been changed on a number of occasions, most likely elicited by differences in the teaching mentality of the given period and the relationship with nature, essential for normal development (Makai, 1997).)

The document lost its legal basis with the dissolution of the League of Nations in 1946 (Lux, 2018).

In December 1946, the League of Nations was replaced by the United Nations, which established the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), charged with providing assistance in feeding, clothing, and ensuring health care services to children suffering from the ravages of the Second World War, and then expanded to supporting education, child protection, and refugee services (About UNICEF).

In 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted yet another Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which included the right to a name and to education, which however were not yet obligations. The Declaration states that in the enactment of laws, the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration. It also became clear at the time that a need had arisen for a comprehensive international declaration which would be binding across the board.

Both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 16 December 1966, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights dealt with the issue of child protection, declaring that every child shall have, without any discrimination, the right to a name, nationality, and such measures of protection from economic and social exploitation as are required by their status as a minor.

During this time, the majority of children still had the possibility to grow up outdoors, with most houses having yards, and poorer people basically living in nature, while the economic and social aspects of life were not as consumer-centric, and environmental pollution was manifest locally.

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 20 November 1989, the result of 10 years of hard work, compiled by the UN's bodies and specialised agencies to comply with the many national, cultural, political, and economic situations, without reducing the level of protection it provides. This Convention is considered a milestone in the area of children's rights and is often considered the "international code" for the rights of the child. This is the first binding international legal instrument in the field, which did not just set forth recommendations but also obligated state parties to comply with its contents. It does its best to carefully and maximally take into account the especially vulnerable situation children are in, and to deal with each such situation separately.

This is the first time the natural environment and its importance in the life of a child is mentioned. Article 24 of the Convention recognises the **right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health**, though it does not separately discuss the importance of providing a healthy natural environment, although that is an essential condition for the health of the child, which is currently far from being a self-evident circumstance in today's society. However, it does mention that **the dangers and risks of environmental pollution** have to be taken into consideration. Point (e) of Article 29, which deals with the educational objectives of the child, sets forth that the education of the child shall be directed to development of **respect for the natural environment**.

Hungary ratified the Convention in 1990, and then promulgated it by way of *Act LXIV of 1991*, and the 1997 act on child protection was also drawn up in harmony with it. Currently, all the countries in the world have ratified the Convention, with the exception of the United States. (Lux, 2018)

The Fundamental Law of Hungary lays out the obligation of all citizens to protect the natural environment, and also states that every child shall have the right to the protection and care necessary for his or her proper physical, mental, and moral development. Although the right to a natural environment is not separately expounded, an active presence of the natural environment in an essential condition for the proper development of the child.

The UN's Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972) shed light on environmental problems. In the years following, a number of coun-

tries around the world dealt with the topic, and accepted the fact that more thorough research is required to assess the relationships between the socio-economic issues of environment, poverty, and under-development. In the 1980s, the concept of sustainable development emerged as a way of striking a balance between economic and social development and the care for the environment and the management of natural resources. This notion has exceptional significance for children, as sustainable development primarily serves their interests and takes them into account.

The 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development emphasises that awareness of sustainable development and of the necessity to care for the natural environment has to be increased among all people, which includes children. It considers education important in achieving development that respects and cares for the natural environment. Principle 10 states: "Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided." Principle 21 reads: "The creativity, ideals and courage of the youth of the world should be mobilized to forge a global partnership in order to achieve sustainable development and ensure a better future for all." It was then that a plan of action for Agenda 21 was drawn up, defining a type of development that must take account of the economic, cultural, social, political, and environmental problems of present and future generations. It outlines a course of action that is economically efficient, socially just, responsible, and environmentally healthy. Agenda 21, entitled "Children and Youth in Sustainable Development", emphasises that education is essential in realising sustainable development, and in improving the attitude of people towards nature and the environment; it is imperative that youth from all parts of the world participate actively in all relevant levels of decision-making processes because it affects their lives today and has implications for their future (Agenda 21, Chapter 25, Objectives).

Act XXXI of 1997 on the Protection of Children and the Administration of Guardianship also does not set forth any separate provisions or rights spe-

cifically pertaining to the natural environment, but deals primarily with the right of the child to physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral development, which is impossible without the natural environment.

In 2005, the UN worked out a 10-year strategy to support the launching and promotion of education on sustainable development, called the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Its main goal is to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainability in all areas of education. Réka Könczei (2014) summarised the results achieved in Hungary over the course of the decade, identifying the criteria along the lines of which learning/education can be considered as education for sustainability. She defined the most important sustainability competencies based on the system of these criteria, such as learning how to learn, learning how to act, learning how to be, and learning how to live together and work together. In the same work, she provides an introduction into the Green Kindergarten and Eco-School programme, operational in Hungary since 2006, which consists of kindergartens and schools that are committed to sustainable values, have an environmentally aware approach, and manage sustainability not only as an ecological, but also as a social and economic construct, building partnerships with students, parents, and local players. Currently, more than 15% of kindergartens and schools in the country, teaching 20% of the nation's children, have been awarded the title.

In 2007, the United Nations Children's Fund commissioned the "Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child", the Hungarian edition of which was edited by Mária Herczog and published in 2009. The Handbook provides detailed instruction on the implementation of laws, policies, and practices that promote and protect the rights of children. For every article, the Handbook's editors collected the analyses and findings worded by the Committee over the course of years, compiled on the basis of state reports.

In connection with Article 12, regarding the respect for the views of the child, it lists all the areas where the criteria could be implemented. It specifically names environmental protection and sustainable development as areas where the views of children have to be taken into consideration and respected, and it lists the summits, conferences, and declarations pertaining to the relationship between children and sustainable development. It also notes how the reports of numerous state parties show that they have successfully developed

their environmental protection education, and have managed to increasingly involve children in the promotion of environmental protection.

In the study, the natural environment also comes up in relation to Article 17 (Child's access to appropriate information), as a term used to check implementation. In this sense, state parties, including Hungary, are obligated to promote children's access to information via the media that support the respect for national values, including the respect for the natural environment.

Even though the document analyses and discusses Article 24 (Child's right to health and health services) very comprehensively and in great detail, examining the issue from a variety of viewpoints, it does not specifically name the natural environment as an essential condition for a healthy life. It highlights and emphasises that state parties are responsible for guaranteeing the right of the child to health by promoting information about the health and development of the child. It is my opinion that this information should also deal with the immeasurable importance of spending as much time as possible in the natural environment in regard to (physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual) health. It encompasses the part of the Alma-Ata Declaration that concerns basic health care services, but the importance of the natural environment is not even mentioned there. However, it does include a requirement that the child be provided with information on how to keep the environment clean, and references the dangers and threats of environmental pollution.

Article 29 (e), which states that the objective of education is to instil in the child a respect for the natural environment, i.e. to imbue the expectations with educational content, is presented by the authors as unique, since this was not articulated in any similar document before the Convention on the Rights of the Child appeared. Their position is that this reflects on the urgency of devoting care to the environment. It emphasises that the competent authorities are tasked with providing assistance in developing environmental protection-related work plans to be implemented with the participation of teachers and students, while schools are responsible for involving school children in all local and regional studies concerning the environment. It quotes General Comment No. 1 (2001) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which stresses that education related to the environment may not be theoretical only: "(...) for the development of respect for the natural environment, education must link issues of environment and sustainable development with socio-economic, sociocultural and demographic issues. Similarly, respect for the natural

environment should be learnt by children at home, in school and within the community, encompass both national and international problems, and actively involve children in local, regional or global environmental projects.” A good example is the environmental protection project that has been under way in the Órség-Vendvidék region in Hungary since 2002. Its topic is the preservation of the diversity of cultivated plants (agro-biodiversity) by mapping and propagating old, so-called landscape fruits. As part of this project and with the help of their own teachers and of university students, the students of four primary schools in the Órség-Vendvidék region assessed the regional types of fruit trees in the vicinity. In addition to providing the students with enduring good memories, the project also combined environmental protection with education to encourage them to become active citizens, and in combination with environmental education it brought them closer to the culture and roots of their own settlements.

The Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights examined the enforcement of the right of the child to protection and physical and mental health as part of a children’s rights project in 2011; in it, the special rights of the child were examined in their broadest sense in light of the enforcement of obligations under international law and of constitutional obligations. Here too it is set out that the creation of a child-centric society is paramount to the interest of the child’s health, welfare, and well-being, which goes far beyond the issue of healthcare; moreover, it also establishes that when it comes to developing the mental health of the child, comprehensive school health-development programmes, self-knowledge, and learning conflict management are just as important. In the context of fundamental rights, their work was based on the enforcement of the right to human dignity, as well as the state obligation system related to the enforcement of the right to the greatest possible degree of physical and mental health. They referred to the Article of the Fundamental Law which states that everyone has the right to physical and mental health (including children; Article XVI), which the Republic of Hungary provides by way of occupational safety, healthcare institutions, and medical care, and by ensuring regular exercise and protecting the natural environment, thereby recognising the natural environment as an indispensable element of physical and mental well-being.

In 2014, to mark the 25th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 10th anniversary of the representation system

for children's rights, the National Centre for Patients' Rights and Documentation prepared an assessment of progress, analysing successes and failures, and providing brief explanations and interpretations for the articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Regarding the right of the child to the best possible health, it adds to Article 24 that the state has to create the conditions which allow children to live healthily, and it also calls attention to the fact that all parties must take measures to enforce the right to health, just as it is the obligation of the child to live a healthy lifestyle. However, the publication makes no mention of the relationship between the natural environment and the child; in fact, it does not mention the natural environment at all.

Based on the decision passed at the Rio+20 UN conference, in 2015 it was decided to work out the Agenda for Sustainable Development for the post-2015 period, the basis of which is well-balanced social development, long-term economic growth, and environmental protection. Hungary took on a prominent role in working out this document. The version developed for domestic targets was published under the title „Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The Agenda lays out 17 goals, and number 11 among them is to “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”. Point 7 of this goal reads: “By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities”. In this same publication, the state undertakes the obligation to regularly monitor and review the implementation of the Agenda by using a robust, voluntary, effective, participation-based, transparent, and integrated monitoring and review framework system.

The Central Statistical Office (KSH) plays a major role in the implementation in Hungary, as it coordinates the tasks pertaining to domestic data reporting with regards to the SDG indicator system developed by the UN Statistical Commission. In addition to reporting data to international organisations, every two years the KSH publishes the “Sustainable Development Indicators in Hungary”, which includes key indicators of the National Sustainable Development Framework Strategy.

Upon reviewing the published documents (2017, 2019, 2020), it was determined that measuring the relationship between children and the environment is not part of the indicators: none of the above documents contain data re-

ferring to such measurements.

Shortly after the European Sustainable Development Week, the KSH published two online publications on its website www.ksh.hu/sdg to provide an overview of the available Hungarian data on the indicators discussed in the UN's documents on sustainable development. The aim of the publication is, on the one hand, to familiarise interested parties with the framework and the main indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals through the involvement of the KSH and, on the other hand, to share the results achieved in an informative and interactive way. Looking through the site (Article 3, 4, 11, 15), the objectives make no reference to this anywhere where the link between the child and the natural environment could be mentioned.

In 2019, the Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation prepared an online questionnaire-based survey that gave children a chance to share their opinions on the 7 most important topics involving them. The questionnaire was completed by 5300 children. The result is very instructive: emotional safety and human factors are more important to them than anything else – instead of state-of-the-art schools and hospitals, what matters to them are teachers and doctors. They crave attention, acceptance and understanding, and not expensive toys and “doodads”. This survey clearly shows that children are at the mercy of adults: they must handle whatever we throw at them. That is an enormous responsibility for parents, teachers, and educators alike. It is our duty to take them outdoors into nature, to give them the possibility to discover the behaviour, essence, laws, and strength of the natural world, and thereby their own behaviour, essence, and strength, i.e. themselves.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Legislators have also realised the importance of this relationship. As a result, educational institutions are also bound by laws that help children form a bond with their natural environment.

Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education states that the teacher is responsible for teaching environmental awareness and a healthy lifestyle.

The teaching programme presented by the Ministry for Human Capacities in

the Decree 20/2012 from 31 August, concerning the operations of education institutions and the usage of names by public education institutions, specifies that the teaching programmes of kindergartens, schools, and colleges determine, among others, the principles, programmes, and activities for health and environmental education. Working to protect nature and the environment, which can be done as part of community service, provides students with an opportunity to perform work in a natural environment, which allows them to grow closer to nature and learn more about it. In addition, it also requires environmental studies to be taught in years 3-4 and science in years 5-12. This same Decree also sets forth the manner for checking the work of teachers, which includes skills in environmental education, the credible representation of sustainability values, and the manner of formulating attitudes related to environmental awareness, which are required in order to authentically pass this knowledge on to children. In its miscellaneous provisions, the Decree states that the minister for education and the minister for environmental protection shall promote environmental education, the execution of educational tasks, the implementation of the Forest School Programme, Forest Kindergarten Programme, Green Kindergarten Programme, and Eco-School Programme by way of joint programmes and announcing tenders. These programmes can all effectively promote the formation and development of the connection between the child and nature.

However, the results of the 2016 Child Right Report, published by the Híntalovon Child Rights Foundation, show that Hungarian students performed even worse than on the last survey in 2012, with science and reading comprehension competencies falling to hitherto unseen lows. The 2018 report included the comment that experts felt that sciences received less emphasis than was desirable.

Currently, science subjects are still being pushed to the background and, due to the shortage of teachers, have been entirely removed from certain years (1, 2, and 12), or joined with other subjects, which has resulted in a significantly lower number of available classes about the plant and animal kingdoms (years 5, 6, and 11) and the natural environment (see the 2020 Curricula), and this is, according to relevant legislation, unlawful. Still, it seems life trumps law.

CONCLUSIONS

Studying the legal regulations, conventions, studies, publications, essays, and historical descriptions pertaining to children, it can be determined that the attention devoted to children was steadily growing as time went by. While the initial focus was on meeting basic needs (food, clothing, exploitation), the scope of their “rights” expanded over time: health care, education, child protection, providing refugee status, followed by the right to a name and citizenship. The importance of the natural environment in the life of a child was first mentioned in 1989, as it was recognised that increasing environmental pollution and the increasingly fast erosion and destruction of natural habitats could prove fatal for man. This process could be prevented, or at least mitigated or slowed down, if children were taught to respect and protect the natural environment. The legislators were driven by “selfish interests”.

Taking the above into account, it can be determined that the statement that **all children have the right to a natural environment and to spending time outdoors** is missing from legislation. They have the right not only to learn about nature at their desks, but to spend time in it: as much time as possible. Freely, without any obligations. To get to know nature, get in tune with it, discover its laws, and enjoy its positive effects on their physical and mental health. That is an essential right of all children. If they experience this firsthand, the respect for the natural environment will seemingly develop of its own accord.

Children have the right to become acquainted with their natural environment.

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VAŽNOST PRIRODNOG OKOLIŠA U KONTEKSTU DJEČJIH PRAVA

SAŽETAK

Program održivog razvoja do 2030. godine temelji se na ljudskim pravima, pa stoga unutar istog okvira treba tumačiti i prava djece. Budući da je cilj Programa održivog razvoja do 2030. svima omogućiti ostvarenje ljudskih prava, važno je u taj kontekst uključiti i prava djeteta te ih u skladu s time i tumačiti.

Sveobuhvatni i ambiciozno sročeni Program održivog razvoja teško je pretočiti u bilo kakve obvezujuće konvencije ili alate na području ljudskih, a pogotovo dječjih prava. Jedan mogući pravac djelovanja mogao bi biti da se tim ciljevima i namjerama upravlja unutar postojećih pravnih okvira i dječjih prava.

Dječja prava relativno su nova pravna grana. Konvencija o pravima djeteta, koja se smatra kodeksom tih prava, postoji tek 33 godine. Odredbe kojima se regulira posebni, ranjivi položaj djece prvi su put zapisane prije otprilike stotinu godina. U to doba jedini je cilj bilo preživljavanje djeteta: hranjenje, odijevanje i zdravstvena skrb. Sadržaj odredbi i propisa postupno se proširivao, tako da se sad dječja prava smatraju jednim od najprogresivnijih aspekata ljudskih prava.

Cilj je ovog rada detaljno istražiti pravne odredbe, konvencije, studije, publikacije, eseje i povijesne opise koje se odnose na djecu pa utvrditi u kojoj se mjeri one bave ulogom prirodnog okoliša u životu djeteta, te u kojoj mjeri prepoznaju i uvjetuju ključnu ulogu koju prirodni okoliš ima u tjelesnom, duhovnom, intelektualnom i moralnom razvoju djece. Jedan od stožernih elemenata predstavlja obrazovanje o okolišu, odnosno Obrazovanje za održivi razvoj (ESD/OOR), koje je, s obzirom na trenutačne prilike u društvu, nužno i logično širiti što je više moguće.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

dječja prava, prirodni okoliš, zdrav život, obrazovanje o okolišu

S obzirom na gore navedeno, vidljivo je da odredbe koje se tiču dječjih prava ne odražavaju dovoljno jasno i kategorično važnost kontinuirane prisutnosti prirodnog okoliša, a pravo djeteta na svjež zrak i odrastanje u prirodnom okolišu nije dovoljno naglašeno, premda je posrijedi ključni preduvjet za zdrav tjelesni, duhovni, intelektualni i moralni razvoj djeteta.

