



## Introduction

In a landmark initiative for child advocacy in Sri Lanka, Child Action Lanka (CAL) hosted the first Child Rights Council on April 5-6, 2025, at Gateway College, Colombo. This pioneering platform was designed to give children from marginalized communities a formal voice in matters that directly affect them. The Child Rights Council (CRC) represents a critical platform for children's participation, moving beyond traditional top-down interventions to amplify "disadvantaged children's voices" and agency in creating social change.

By providing a structured forum for children to articulate their experiences, develop leadership skills, and propose solutions, the Council addresses a significant gap in Sri Lanka's child rights landscape - "the absence of children's perspectives in public discourse."

As a signatory to the Child Rights Convention, Sri Lanka holds a great responsibility to protect children's rights, particularly for the substantial population coming from underprivileged circumstances who lack proper safety nets. The urgency of this initiative is clear: according to Saroja Savithri Paulraj, Minister of Women and Child Affairs, over 50,000 Sri Lankan children drop out of school annually, with child labor surging since 2022 as economically struggling families prioritize work over education. Despite representing nearly 20% of the population and bearing the long-term consequences of today's policy decisions, children's perspectives remain largely unheard.

Child Action Lanka, which operates eight child development centers across the island providing education, health, nutrition, and child protection support since 2006, used our extensive experience with children to bring together delegates from nine diverse communities which are Akkarayan, Batticaloa, Colombo, Galle, Kandy, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Bogawantalawa, and Nuwara Eliya ensuring representation of underprivileged children from different demographics of Sri Lanka.







## How it Started

In July, 2023, Child Action Lanka successfully piloted a “Child Rights Awareness Program” in Batticaloa to empower children to understand, advocate for, and protect their rights. We also amplify their “Right To Participate” in changing outcomes in their lives.

Thereafter Child Action Lanka went on to conduct the program in Nine different locations across Sri Lanka.

The Child Rights Awareness Program aimed to provide children and youth from high-need communities an opportunity to recognize the value of their own experiences and expertise in their lives. Through creative activities, interactive workshops and discussion, these children became advocates, creating community-specific declarations that documented their daily challenges and proposed practical, child-centered solutions. Along with these declarations the children made posters that artistically depicted the challenges that they brought attention to in each declaration.

These declarations went on to be posted at the Child Rights Council Closing Ceremony for all to see.





## What happened

To create a structured environment where children could effectively articulate their concerns, CAL partnered with Sri Lanka Model United Nations (SLMUN). This collaboration adopted formal UN protocols to create a parliamentary setting where the young delegates served as ambassadors for their own communities, bringing authentic experiences to the discussion. Experienced SLMUN delegates acted as mentors, that co-represented each location, and guided the children through the formal procedures to help them present their ideas confidently in both Tamil and Sinhala. Working in specialised committees, the delegates explored and deepened their understanding of key topics such as the Right to Education, Fundamental Rights, and the Right to Participation - transforming the space into an environment for critical thinking, perspective building, and peer-led learning. These collaborations between mentors and mentees, resulted in fostering mutual empathy and understanding, challenging preconceptions on both sides. As they worked together, they developed relationships that demonstrate how collaborative problem-solving can unite young people from diverse backgrounds. At the conclusion of the two-day forum, the children presented a series of resolutions which were experience-driven proposals that reflect the realities that children face and the changes they hope to see.



At the end of the two days, the CRC came together for a meaningful close and inspiring call to action. The ceremony showcased the powerful work the children had done to advocate for their rights. This included nine powerful declarations - one from each community, alongside compelling visual expressions that brought attention to the issues affecting their rights. Adding further depth and cultural richness, children also staged theatrical performances to highlight the challenges they face. These included traditional forms such as Villu Paatu, a musical storytelling performance presented by children from Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, and Akkarayan - through this representation of their culture they used music and poetry to share the realities of their communities and give voice to their lived experiences.

## The Impact

The Council uncovered unique challenges that children in different regions face. Delegates from Bogawantalawa, Batticaloa and Nuwereliya spoke about Teacher Shortages in their school in core subjects like science, mathematics, and English, which affects their chances of progressing beyond basic education or qualifying in national exams. Children in Killinochchi and Mulativu spoke about the dire challenges that they face because of poverty that their families face. Children in Colombo spoke about the vulnerabilities they feel when they are exposed to violence, drugs and alcohol in their own neighborhood. These critical issues emerged through the children's testimonies which they were able to share with each other and would have helped them broaden their world view. These first-hand accounts provided insights that statistical research alone cannot capture.

The Council is an initiative that is necessary, because the right to participate is one that is frequently overlooked from the Convention on the Rights of a Child. However, it is a right that recognizes children as active agents rather than passive recipients of care and protection. By guaranteeing children "the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them," the Convention acknowledges children's capacity to contribute meaningfully to discussions and decisions about their lives.



***"Their lived experiences are an invaluable resource for effective policy."***



In the context of Sri Lanka's current challenges, this initiative takes on special significance, because children experiencing poverty, educational disruption, or family hardship have unique insights into how these problems affect them and they have an opinion on how these issues should be dealt with. Their lived experiences is an invaluable resource for effective policy. Children from these demographics rarely have adults in their lives that can defend their rights, and they are often the ones that see their rights being sacrificed in multiple ways because of their circumstance.

Furthermore, by articulating their views, reasoning through problems, and engaging in decision-making processes, they develop critical thinking skills, confidence, and civic responsibility. These experiences prepare them to become engaged citizens who can confidently contribute to Sri Lanka's future development. Upholding children's right to participate is not just a legal obligation but a practical necessity for building sustainable, inclusive solutions to the country's challenges. The Council therefore is a steppingstone to help children see the bigger picture, understand how to navigate civic structures and create links between them and social safety nets that will help them progress in life.





“This was the first ever time I truly felt that I made an actual impact in a conference. The 2 days I spent with my mentee is something I'll be always proud of”

Prasudi Addithya  
- Mentor Delegate from the  
Committee on the Right to  
Fundamental Rights

## The Way Forward

The Assistant Commissioner from Probations Child Care Services, Ms N D Perera who attended the CRC, highlighted the need for their office to work with initiatives like this in order to create opportunities for children to “participate” and influence change. Other invitees from the Open University of Sri Lanka, UNICEF and FISD also were among those that showed their allegiance to the notion that we need to create opportunities for children to come forward and take leadership in creating change in Sri Lanka.

This is just the beginning; we hope that this initiative will reach more children in Sri Lanka from diverse backgrounds to work together at future council's. We have declarations and resolutions made by our children which offers insight into the challenges that children face on a day-to-day basis. Knowing what it is like in a day of the life of these children might just move us to prioritize social change that can help them prosper.

It is now our responsibility to use these materials to encourage authorities to influence change at all levels in the Sri Lankan structures and systems that are created for social welfare of the children. What emerged from this initiative was a movement of young voices united by the shared belief that change is possible when those most affected are at the center of the conversation.

“It was a truly enriching experience to mentor and engage with underprivileged delegates, gaining valuable insight into their challenges while working collectively to advocate for their rights.”

Nithiksha Elankeeran  
- Mentor Delegate from the  
Committee on the Right to  
Participation

“When I heard of the true experiences of our mentee delegates, the struggle they have in securing their rights, that's when I could draw parallels between the research and reality. Listening to their grievances and struggles really made feel that we all should advocate for better child rights.”

Aditha Geeganage  
- Mentor Delegate from the  
Committee on the Right to  
Participation

