

Speech of Zhenya Ershova
Conference on 18, 19 and 20 November
«CRC30 – What future for children and their rights?»

My name is Zhenya Ershova, I am 16 years old and I represent SOS Children's Villages Ukraine.

And I want to tell you about the situation of children in Ukraine. My country suffers from mass poverty, social problems and armed conflict that has been going on in the eastern part of the country for five years. According to UNICEF, more than half a million children were affected by the conflict in eastern Ukraine. A third of them need urgent psychological help.

Due to poverty and armed conflict, children are often left without parental care. I know this from personal experience, because I live in the Luhansk region 100 km from the front line and I am brought up in a foster family of SOS Children's Villages Ukraine. Unfortunately, the state most often sends children to institutional care, and now almost 100,000 children live there. And in family-type care and foster families - half as much. In the conflict-affected Donetsk and Luhansk regions, over the 5 years of the conflict, the number of children in institutional care has been increasing. Although most of them could live in families, if the Ukrainian state created more foster families and supporting social services for families with children, after all, 92% of children in institutional care have biological parents who need help.

To return children to the family environment, in 2017, in Ukraine, the government launched a reform of institutional care - the reform of DI (deinstitutionalization). The reform is undergoing great resistance from local state authorities. It is very difficult for them to change the usual bureaucratic system of institutional care, although children living without families suffer from it. Often authorities justify their passivity by the fact that in Ukraine there continues an armed conflict in the East. But can a child wait until the war is over? Children want to live in safety and family now! I talk about this from my own experience. I am brought up in a foster family of SOS Children's Villages Ukraine and feel the importance of the work of SOS Children's Villages for children like me and for many children in Ukraine and the world, because only in the family the child has the opportunity to develop, reveal the potential and become a successful person.

Feeling responsible, I strive to be active and I am a member of the National Council of Children and Youth, created under Commissioner of the President of Ukraine for Children's Rights (Children's Ombudsman). This is an advisory council, which includes 60 children - leaders of school self-government and graduates of institutional care from 25 regions of Ukraine. We convey the views of children to government leaders when they make decisions regarding children's rights. Our council works in 4 areas: 1) countering bullying; 2) DI reform; 3) values and volunteering; 4) inclusion. I am active in the direction of countering bullying and I conduct lessons on the mechanisms of countering bullying in my school.

Therefore, in anticipation of the adoption of the UN Resolution on the rights of children deprived of parental care by the UN General Assembly, I want to recall the basic right of a child to a loving and caring environment and without excuse for armed conflict. And I would like my voice to be heard in Ukraine and in the world. The time has come for a change in the childcare system. It is necessary to invest resources, firstly, to help families with children in crisis, and secondly, to create a sufficient number of foster families of different types. Children should live in families, not in institutional care, and the state is obliged to provide this.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is already 30 years old, and I am 16 and still have more than 700 institutional care in Ukraine. And the children are still not a priority!