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Final Report – IHRP Internship at Defence for Children International (DCI) in Geneva, Switzerland

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This summer, I spent ten weeks working as a Legal and Advocacy Intern at the International Secretariat Office of Defence for Children International (DCI) in Geneva. I had the opportunity to understand how NGOs operate, how they lobby and influence the international community, and how the United Nations bodies interact with one another.

DCI is an NGO that works to promote and protect children's rights on a global, regional, national, and local level. Significantly, DCI was at the forefront of the drafting process and lobbying of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989. This Convention is a binding international treaty and one of the most important documents for the protection of children's rights. It sets out minimum standards and all states that ratify the Convention must take on legal obligations under international law. That is, their laws, policies, and practices must align with the rights contained in the UNCRC. All countries are subject to review on a rotating basis. To date, almost all countries are parties to this Convention (195 UN member states).

While DCI works to protect children's rights in many different areas, the central issue that DCI emphasizes is juvenile justice. Defined broadly, juvenile justice aims to address root causes that bring children into conflict with the law, to develop methods for prevention, and to investigate strategies for support, rehabilitation, and reinsertion. Article 37 of the UNCRC states that the deprivation of liberty is always to be used as a last resort and for the shortest possible period of time. This is because deprivation of liberty has very negative consequences for the child's harmonious development, exposing children to increased risks of abuse, violence, acute social discrimination, and denial of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Society is affected at large as deprivation of liberty tends to increase social exclusion, recidivism rates, and public expenditure. Since the Millennium Development Goals expire at the end of this year, the United Nations is in the process of defining a post-2015 agenda under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This is highly significant in that it will define the development agenda for the upcoming years. From DCI's perspective, investing in children is key to the success of the SDGs. Protecting children's rights has a direct positive impact on their life development, augmenting economic growth, and providing real returns.

My projects and tasks brought me into the heart of the UN's human rights work. I attended and monitored the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the 29th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC). At both the UPR and the CRC, I wrote reports on the status of children's rights in the country being reviewed. This consisted of researching and reading background reports beforehand, familiarizing myself with international treaties, and then analyzing the state's national legislation to see whether it is in compliance with international human rights

standards. Following the sessions also allowed me to spot the contentious issues, pick up on the different perspectives of member states, and consolidate all of this into writing. Apart from these sessions, I also had the opportunity to sit at roundtables on the Post-2015 SDG agenda and ask questions to high-level policy makers. During the HRC, I also helped to create a side-event organized by DCI on the topic of girls' access to education in West Africa. It was extremely interesting to hear from those involved directly in projects in countries such as Sierra Leone and Ghana. The presenters discussed strategies and best practices for combating obstacles to implementing and sustaining girls' education.

My most exciting project consisted of writing the oral statement to represent DCI at the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers at the HRC. This was presented before the President of the HRC, High Commissioner of Human Rights, Special Rapporteur, member states, observer states, and NGOs. This oral statement enabled me to participate in the lobbying and advocacy process and transmit both my own and DCI's message to the international community. The statement advocated for the importance of investing in child-sensitive justice and to ensure effective implementation of international juvenile justice standards for children who have been deprived of liberty. It also shared some of DCI's recent work: 1) a European project backed by the EU to evaluate the monitoring systems of child detention centres, and 2) the successful campaign to the UN to request a Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty. The statement also contained several recommendations to member states to integrate child-specific training and capacity-building initiatives for all judges, lawyers, and prosecutors to create a child-sensitive justice system.

Being in the centre of the human rights arena broadened my views on global issues. The work on human rights is daunting and there are many sobering human rights violations. At times, it was frustrating to work at a high-level organization and not see the operational side, to see what is happening on the ground, and what hours and hours of discussions amount to in practice. Despite the challenges, it was inspiring to see member states and civil society coming together to try to find a solution. It was inspiring to hear about all of the improvements that a state has made since their last review. It was inspiring to think about all of the progress that has been made since the conception of the United Nations and to immerse myself in the determination of the global community to always strive to do better.

Apart from enjoying my work at DCI and at the UN, I also thoroughly enjoyed meeting other interns and learning about their work at their respective organizations. It was an immersive, eye-opening, and rewarding experience. I sincerely thank the IHRP for this incredible opportunity.