

## **Statement of the Child Rights Connect Children's Advisory Team at the 1st meeting of the Intergovernmental Working Group on an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

My name is Lana, and I am sharing this statement on behalf of the Children's Advisory Team of Child Rights Connect. With my team, we did a survey and held consultations with children in 12 countries across different geographic regions. Thanks to this, we collected the views of 1,300 children to prepare a report for the call of the High Commissioner.

The majority of the issues that prohibit children from accessing pre-primary and secondary education stems back to the subject of cost, as shown throughout the results of our surveys. Besides school fees, things like school supplies, meals, and transportation being at a relatively high price can cause great financial strain on families, which has an abundance of effects on young people, both mental and academic. It can lead to social exclusion from peers due to the embarrassment a young person may feel because of their financial problems and can increase stress and anxiety. In addition, it can lower academic performance, reduce access to learning sources, and cause young people to miss learning opportunities.

Our consultations also showed something very important: children and adolescents are not only aware of these barriers, but they are deeply interested in creating solutions. We were incredibly surprised to see how deeply interested children and adolescents are in creating public policies to achieve free, quality education. It gave us hope to see their proposals, their opinions, how they want everything to be more fair for everyone, and, above all, to know how many of them are motivated to change this world to one where education is not a privilege for the few, but a right for everyone. If children can see these problems and propose solutions, then decision-makers must be ready to listen and act. We, children, are ready to do everything we can, but we cannot do it alone.

What children are asking for is not charity, but justice. We are asking for investment in education that truly reaches us: removing hidden costs like supplies and transportation, ensuring inclusive schools for children with disabilities, and creating systems where no child is left behind.

Education is the foundation of everything—without it, children lose their future, and the world loses its chance to move forward. So today, on behalf of children everywhere, I ask you: keep your promises. Make free pre-primary and secondary education a reality. Not tomorrow, not in ten years, but now. Because every day without action is another day where a child is denied their

right, their opportunity, and their voice. And we, children, will not stop reminding you—until every child, everywhere, can go to school freely, equally, and with dignity.