

The 2010 International Children's Peace Prize winner campaigns for the right to name and nationality for children in the Dominican Republic.



On 29th November 2010, the International Children's Peace Prize 2010 was awarded to Francia Simon (1994), a girl from the Dominican Republic. She campaigns for the right of children to name and nationality – both for children born in the Dominican Republic as well as for refugee children from Haiti.

The International Children's Peace Prize, an initiative from the KidsRights Foundation, is presented annually to an exceptional child, whose courageous or otherwise remarkable actions have made a difference in improving children's rights, which affect children around the world.

A girl from the Dominican Republic who had no status

Francia lives with her mother, her daughter and two brothers in one of the *Bateyes* in the south-west of the Dominican Republic. Francia's father died when she was still very young. She is finishing her final year of secondary school, is an active member of the community and likes to play soccer. She even leads a mixed soccer team with great enthusiasm, aiming to show that girls are as good at soccer as boys.

Bateyes are isolated communities close to the sugar cane fields. The residents are mostly migrants and refugees from Haiti. These communities are still growing while the facilities remain inadequate; the huts lack sewerage and running water, and there is great poverty. Most Haitians who live in the *bateyes* do so without any official status. This means that also their children lack any form of registration, even if they were actually born on Dominican soil. This has been going on for many generations, with all its consequences.

As Francia was born in the *Bateyes* of Haitian parents, she initially had no means to claim her rights either. Her family, like all others, was stateless. Francia has had to fight hard to improve her own living conditions. It was impossible for her to go to secondary school because she did not have the right papers.

The situation in the Dominican Republic¹

As of 2009, over 22 percent of children under the age of five are not officially registered. Many families fail to register their children, because the parents themselves are undocumented, registration points are too far away, and parents of Haitian origin face difficulties with registration of children born on Dominican territory. Children born to Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic are systematically denied birth registration and documentation, and are thus denied the national constitutional right of acquiring nationality by *jus solis*².

As a result of these alarming numbers, initiatives have been taken to improve birth registration. Civil registration campaigns, issuing birth certificates for free, an additional registration system for mothers without a birth certificate, as well as the work of national organisations, have triggered a public debate in the Dominican Republic on the question of birth registration. However, large amounts of children remain unregistered.

¹ Reference: Abdellah el Morabet Belhaj (student) and Prof. Kristin Henrard - Erasmus school of Law

² *Jus soli* is the principle by which a child born within a country's territorial jurisdiction acquires that country's nationality. *Jus sanguinis* is the principle by which a child acquires the nationality of his or her parents.

Francia: a special girl

Francia did not resign herself to the fact that she had no birth certificate and could therefore not attend secondary school. She investigated her rights and how she could secure them in all kinds of ways. With a positive outcome – she is now registered and is in her final year of secondary school.

Based on this success and with the knowledge she has gained, Francia dedicates herself to the rights of other children in similar situations, always continuously appealing to the Right of children to Name and Nationality (Article 7.1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). She now informs parents and children about every child's right to be registered, after which she guides the parents and child(ren) through the process of registration until the child and his or her name are officially recognized and a nationality is acquired.

After the earthquakes in Haiti in 2010, Francia also participated in programmes that gave shelter to Haitian refugees. She led entertainment programmes and helped children find shelter and support.

As soon as children are officially recognized and no longer stateless, they are entitled to healthcare, they can go to school, and as such increase their chance of employment and improved living conditions. Official recognition also significantly reduces the risk of exploitation and human trafficking, to which this group is so vulnerable. The Right to Name and Nationality is therefore one of the most important conditions for the implementation of many children's rights. Francia has already helped more than 170 children to get birth certificates. For her efforts in helping to shape a new generation of children in the Dominican Republic, Francia Simon was awarded the International Children's Peace Prize 2010.

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