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Making the youth's voice heard: The story of a child can change the world

By Tako Rietveld

Children changed my life

Children changed the life of journalist Tako Rietveld (37). Since last year he is the first correspondent exclusively for children. He travels the world to make their voices heard. 'They know how the world should be. Listen!'



With children you can expect the unexpected

The sun sets in Catania, Sicily, Italy. Ayuba (14) gives me a hug. 'Thank you Tako. Thank you for listening to me.' The boy arrived in Europe by boat from Libya. Alone, like thousands of other children and teenagers. Fleeing from war, looking for a better future. We see them in

the newspapers every week, every day. We see them in the headlines of the TV-news. Hardly ever do we hear them telling their stories themselves. 'Thank you for hearing my voice', Ayuba continues. 'More people should be talking with us, instead of talking about us.' Goosebumps all over my arms and back. This is exactly why I started my job as a children's correspondent. Bam, a football hits my head. 'Pay attention', Ayuba laughs. He continues playing soccer with his friends. This is why I love children. You can expect the unexpected.

Children look at the world from a different perspective. Not only because of their height, mostly because they are open-minded, positive and uncomplicated. Their views, their opinions, their unique thoughts make a difference. Then why is it that the world is not listening to children? Why do we see children as cute, ignorant creatures that only like to play? Why do we constantly underestimate them and treat them like secondary citizens?

We can learn so many things from young people. For example, from their brightness, creativity and curiosity. From their honesty, humour and playfulness. And most of all from their positivity, pureness and spontaneity. Children changed the way I look at things. Children changed my life. I know their voices can change the world if we start to see them as competent partners.

Children focus on possibilities

The children's wisdom came to me working as a reporter for the Dutch national children's news called 'Jeugdjournaal', where I started in 2001. Meeting children, listening to them and speaking with them about the world news, that was my every day job. Over those years I met hundreds, maybe thousands of children, mainly in The Netherlands. They surprised me, made me laugh or think. The more I spoke with them, the more I realised their voices make a difference. Speaking to children became a specialty in the almost 15 years I did this amazing job.

A perfect example is my one hand. I was born with a left and without a right hand. With a short arm and a long one, I tell children. Adults usually react with pity. They assume it must be very difficult and ask if I can drive a car or work on a computer. The answer is 'yes' by the way. Children mostly react with curiosity. They want to see and touch and ask if I can put a 3D printed robot-hand on my arm, like Ironman... Children focus on possibilities, while adults look at problems. Another interesting survey was done by asking the question: if you could change one part of your body, add, remove, make it bigger or smaller, what would it be? The adult answer is mainly about belly, breast, nose or ears. Children would like to have wings, spit fire like dragons or run like a cheetah. Still we don't see what children could add to our world.

I remember the world talking about children after hurricane Haiyan in the Philippines. More than half of the victims, hundreds of thousands, were children. Everyone showed their pictures and images. But literally, and I looked everywhere, not one single Filipino child told his or her story. No one asked them a question. It didn't feel right. So I went to my boss and asked him: Why don't we let children all over the world tell their stories? Hear their ideas

and opinions... He told me: 'Great idea Tako, but that's not what we are here for. We are the Dutch News Agency, with a news programme for children. It's not our priority to let them tell their stories.' What could I do?

Everything changed for me in December 2013. I got the chance to go to South Africa, to the funeral of Nelson Mandela. There, in the small village of Qunu, where Mandela grew up, I met 13-year-old Vuyo. He was helping his father with the preparations for the funeral. This South African boy spoke so passionately about being in this place on this day, I was touched by his dynamism, by the sparkle in his eyes. Vuyo showed me the place where Nelson Mandela used to play when he was young. The sliding stone. Mandela later said his time here, as a child, was the happiest time of his life. While I was watching the children play and the world leaders arrive for the funeral, Vuyo said something to me that changed my life. 'There are so many journalists here. Hundreds of reporters, correspondents, from all over the world. You are the only one listening to us. No one else is taking us seriously. Why isn't there a special reporter for us children?' When I realised what this young African boy was saying, I decided to quit my job. To become the first correspondent exclusively for children in the world. Vuyo was right: these bright boys and girls need a voice.

'Why should we listen to children?' is a question many adults ask me. 'Children have to listen to us,' they say. 'We have the experience, the education, we know how things work.' And: 'Children have to listen to us. To learn from us.' Fair point. It's totally acceptable, biological reasoning. We humans are very hierarchical. Like monkeys. The experienced adults are the leaders. The little ones just have to watch and learn. So why should we listen to children? Because we are humans, is my answer. It's called civilisation. Because children are part of our society. A very important part. More than half the world's population is younger than 25 years old. It's the largest generation of youth in history. And you wonder why we should listen to them? It makes me very angry. I call it discrimination.

Let youth know their voices matter

Working with children all over the world is a privilege. They are not separated by colour, religion or by being a boy or a girl. They know everyone has the same needs. In a recent world survey children put 'happiness' as the most important thing in life. The world needs to hear these young voices. We need to hear them. And we need to let the youth know their voices matter. Children don't talk about politics, benefits or profits. They speak with their hearts. They are not restrained by the adult way of life. Children are the best free thinkers of the world. They don't have to attend expensive seminars to think 'outside the box'. They are not even in it. The youth communicates in different ways than we did five, ten or twenty years ago. They learn in different ways, they study in different ways and they will work in different ways. That's why we have to start to listen to them now.

'Children in our country don't speak that much,' a journalist from Ghana told me during the course I gave to him and his colleagues. 'They don't have an opinion yet.' We went to a school and he asked the pupils their opinion about how people are treating the environment. No one dared to give an answer. So I stopped him and started to give an introduction in class. 'Hi everyone! I'm Tako from Holland and I'm here to help these guys

from Ghanaian television make a report. We are speaking about the environment and we would like to hear from you what you think about it.' Their faces turned to smiles and they started talking about garbage in the streets, plastic and how they thought their government could change that. With the proper intention, genuine interest and the right introduction, children will share their thoughts, opinions and stories.

An unwritten rule for journalists is, we leave children alone. Unbelievable! You film them all the time, but you cannot talk with them? It makes me so angry. Most journalists, most adults in general, don't have the time, skills and decency to sit down with a child and listen. We speak about the youth all the time. About education, care and protection. We speak about it with specialists, politicians and leaders. But the real experts are the children and youngsters themselves. They have the daily experience and know exactly what's right and wrong. They know what they need, what's best for them and the people around them. Children are specialists in understanding the adult world. They know how the world should be. It's time to really start listening.

Ayuba and his friends are going for an ice-cream after the soccer match in Italy. 'I hate it when people call me refugee,' Ayuba says. 'When someone from Australia comes to Europe, they call him a student and all doors open. Just because I was born in Africa, I have far fewer possibilities in life. It's not fair.' They boys can't believe I came to the south of Italy just to speak to them. It makes them feel important, heard and taken seriously. I tell them my story, why I became the children's correspondent. They share their stories. How they left their countries, how they travelled on big trucks through the desert, how they arrived in a warehouse in Libya. How smugglers with guns took everything from them, how they were stowed on a small ship. Locked up in the hold, so they wouldn't cause trouble. 'There was no drinking water or toilet. Children were crying and throwing up. Everyone was afraid because no one knew how to swim. The boat was rocking from side to side in the waves. There was place for 80 people, but we were with 500 on board. After a few hours the engine broke, we thought we were going to die. Then our boat was discovered by a helicopter and we were rescued. Most people are paying a lot of money to make this trip. An airline ticket is cheaper, but we are not allowed to fly. I don't know who invented these rules. I think it could be a lot less complicated.'

The story of a child can change the world

The story of a child can change the world. There are hundreds of stories about World War Two, for example. One story is the most famous of them all, and that's the story of a child. Everyone knows *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Her story shook the world. It still does. What about other children? In Syria, Gaza, South Sudan... They have stories to tell too. Today's Anne Frank is still hidden.

Everywhere I come children and youngsters are happy to talk to me. In Sierra Leone, in New York and in Lebanon. Society puts children on the side. It's so wrong. This week I was at a primary school, talking with 11-year olds about the refugee crisis. 'It's not a subject to talk about with children,' some adults say. Wake up! Children that age see the news, read the papers, get the reports on Facebook and Instagram, they see the pictures of dead

bodies on the beach. And you don't talk with them about that? If children don't talk about these things with their parents, or with other adults, if they feel no one takes them seriously, who do they go to when they are facing real problems. When they are being bullied, when they are a victim of child abuse...?



Tako interviewing children who work on the fields in Lebanon, with Syria in the background.

By listening to the youth we get to look at things in a different way. We also teach them how to put forward their thoughts and feelings. They gain confidence and develop their identity. If children learn all this at a young age, imagine what that will bring them for the rest of their lives. Imagine what it will bring them, imagine what it will bring you, imagine what it will bring the world. Children force us to think. To explain things in an uncomplicated way. You know how they always ask questions. Why? How? What? And the famous 'why not?' It sometimes drives us crazy. But they force us to cut to the chase, to get to the core. And many times while explaining you realise, 'hm, maybe the kid is right.'

This is why I started to let children all over the world tell their stories. And it's just the beginning. This year we launched [The Youth Foundation](#) with a small group of journalists and other specialists. Our goal is to have a youth correspondent in every country of the world. We exchange stories and bring the youth's voice forward in the media. We teach journalists how to let children tell their stories and we help adults, governments and organisations to listen to the youth.

To wrap up, the world is coping with many problems. Its obvious adults are having big trouble finding solutions. I'm not saying children have all the answers, but I do know they come up with the brightest ideas. I will do everything I can to let the youth tell their stories and let the world realise it's time to listen. Being a children's correspondent is the most beautiful job in the world and everyone I meet, in New York, Brussels or Qunu, agrees it's important. Unfortunately no government, NGO or other organisation is funding us or

paying a salary. Starting this initiative is hard work, a struggle, but it won't take long before the world realises what we are bringing. Of course you can support The Youth Foundation or share this message. And if you think we can help your organisation by bringing in the youth's voice or opinion, you can always contact us. Most of all I'd like to ask you only one thing. It doesn't matter if you're a manager, a politician, a president or a parent. If you speak about children, don't forget to speak with them as well. Please listen to the youth.

Author

Tako Rietveld (37) is a Dutch journalist and the first children's correspondent in the world. He used to be reporter and presenter for the Dutch National News television, now he lets children and teenagers worldwide tell their stories. He also is the founder of The Youth News Foundation.

info@theyouth.org

www.theyouth.org