


Annual Report

2022

United Nations General Assembly:

Promotion and protection of the
rights of children





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*We must recognize
children as agents of
change and ensure that
inclusive participation
is an integral part of the
SDG implementation.*



Dr. Najat Maalla M'jid

Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children

Guided by General Assembly [resolution 62/141](#), by which the Assembly established the mandate, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children is a global, independent advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children. In its [resolution 76/147](#), the Assembly reaffirmed its support for the work of the Special Representative, recognizing the progress achieved and the role of the mandate in promoting further implementation of the recommendations stemming from the United Nations study on violence against children and in supporting Member States in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Assembly also took note, with appreciation, of

the leadership of the Special Representative in the follow-up to the United Nations global study on children deprived of liberty and encouraged the Special Representative to continue her work in that regard.

In the present report, the Special Representative reviews actions she has taken at the global, regional and national levels to fulfil her mandate and provides an overview of the results achieved. She highlights how the need for action to prevent and respond effectively to violence against children is more urgent than ever. Too many children are still left behind, as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and ongoing humanitarian crises have magnified their exposure and vulnerability to violence. In the report, the Special Representative outlines the impact of the climate crisis on child protection and well-being, emphasizing the need to understand and address the linkages between those two pressing challenges and the manner in which the climate crisis acts as a threat multiplier for violence against children.

The Special Representative stresses that, with less than eight years remaining to keep the promise made through the Sustainable Development Goals to end all forms of violence against children, there is a need to learn the lessons from the pandemic, ongoing humanitarian emergencies and the climate crisis and to invest in an inclusive, resilient and safe recovery for all children worldwide, leaving no one behind.

Accelerating action to end violence against children by 2030, while building back better and beyond



Investment in child-sensitive and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention is needed more than ever.

Children's vulnerability to violence continues to be exacerbated worldwide by multiple and overlapping crises, including increasing poverty, social and economic inequalities, forced displacement, conflict, climate change, environmental degradation, natural disasters, food insecurity, widespread violence and political instability.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 billion children lived in multidimensional poverty, a figure that has since increased by 10 per cent as a result of the pandemic. Poverty is a powerful driver of various forms of violence, including child labour, child marriage, child trafficking, child sexual exploitation and the recruitment of children into criminal, armed and/or violent extremist groups. For example, UNICEF estimates that more than 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides as a result of the pandemic over the next decade. UNICEF and the International Labour Organization have warned that 9 million additional children worldwide are now at risk of being pushed into child labour by the end of 2022, with global progress on tackling child labour stalled for the first time in 20 years.

At the end of 2021, conflict, violence and other crises had left a record 36.5 million children displaced from their homes – the highest number recorded since the Second World War.

In addition, the armed conflict in Ukraine has led to 3.0 million children inside Ukraine, and more than 2.2 million children in refugee-hosting countries, in need of humanitarian assistance, as almost two of every three children have been displaced by fighting. In 2020 alone, 9.8 million of the 30.1 million new weather-related internal displacements involved children.

The impact of violence is devastating, immediate and lifelong. Violence kills children: an estimated 40,150 children in 2017, accounting for 8.4 per cent of all homicides. Violence impairs their brain development, their physical and mental health and their ability to learn. The economic costs are also catastrophic. A leading study suggests they could be as high as 8 per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP). National studies have estimated that violence against children may cost up to 5 per cent of GDP. Member States have pursued a range of initiatives to respond to the challenges created by the pandemic and other crises (see A/76/224). However, those responses are insufficient, especially as trends in violence against children are moving in the wrong direction.

A paradigm shift is needed. Spending on cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention has a high return and must be seen as an investment. As outlined in "The violence prevention dividend: why preventing violence against children makes economic sense", an advocacy brief published by the Office of the Special Representative, UNICEF and civil society partners, there is a compelling economic case for greater investment to prevent and respond to violence against children.

Cost-effective prevention and response measures already exist and should be embedded in Governments' economic growth and

development plans, supported by adequate resources, monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

These critical times and the impact of multiple global crises continue to demonstrate the essential role of multilateralism and international cooperation. The impact of international cooperation is most efficient when it actively strengthens partnerships and fosters South-South, North-South and circular cooperation, moving from donor-driven and siloed initiatives to people-centred, context-specific, results-oriented and sustainable mutual partnerships.

Mobilizing action, building bridges and strengthening cooperation with key stakeholders

Support provided to Member States

The Special Representative continued her close engagements with Member States in the preparation of their voluntary national reviews for the high-level political forum on sustainable development. In 2022, she engaged actively with 44 Member States that were preparing and presenting their voluntary national reviews and/or in which voluntary local reviews were being undertaken, supporting them in the use of the process to advocate in favour of a comprehensive, multisectoral and integrated approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals as they relate to violence against children and its drivers.

The Special Representative mobilized the United Nations system at the global, regional and country levels to enhance technical support for Member States, especially through her engagements with resident coordinators, country teams and regional commissions, as well as through her participation in all regional sustainable development forums.

In examining the voluntary national reviews and presentations made by Member States during the high-level political forum held in 2021, the Office of the Special Representative identified a number of key points. Integrated approaches to violence against children pursued



by Member States on the ground were not being included consistently in voluntary national reviews. The interlinked nature of various forms of violence and its drivers in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals could be more prominently addressed. While many Member States stressed the plight of children in vulnerable situations, there was limited reporting on action taken for their protection and care. The positive impact of a system-wide approach taken by the United Nations system at the country level to support the preparation of national reviews was also noted. Lastly, the Office review observed that more than 20 Member States had highlighted the involvement of children in their national review processes and that several had mentioned children's contributions to Goal implementation. The Special Representative is highly encouraged by the responses and support received from Member States with regard to the input and guidance provided through the process.

The 2022 high-level political forum,

on building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda, was an opportunity to highlight the need to invest in integrated, cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention. The Special Representative was a lead discussant at the session on building back better and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, at which she reflected on the opportunity presented for a paradigm shift to end violence and achieve truly human- and child-centred development.

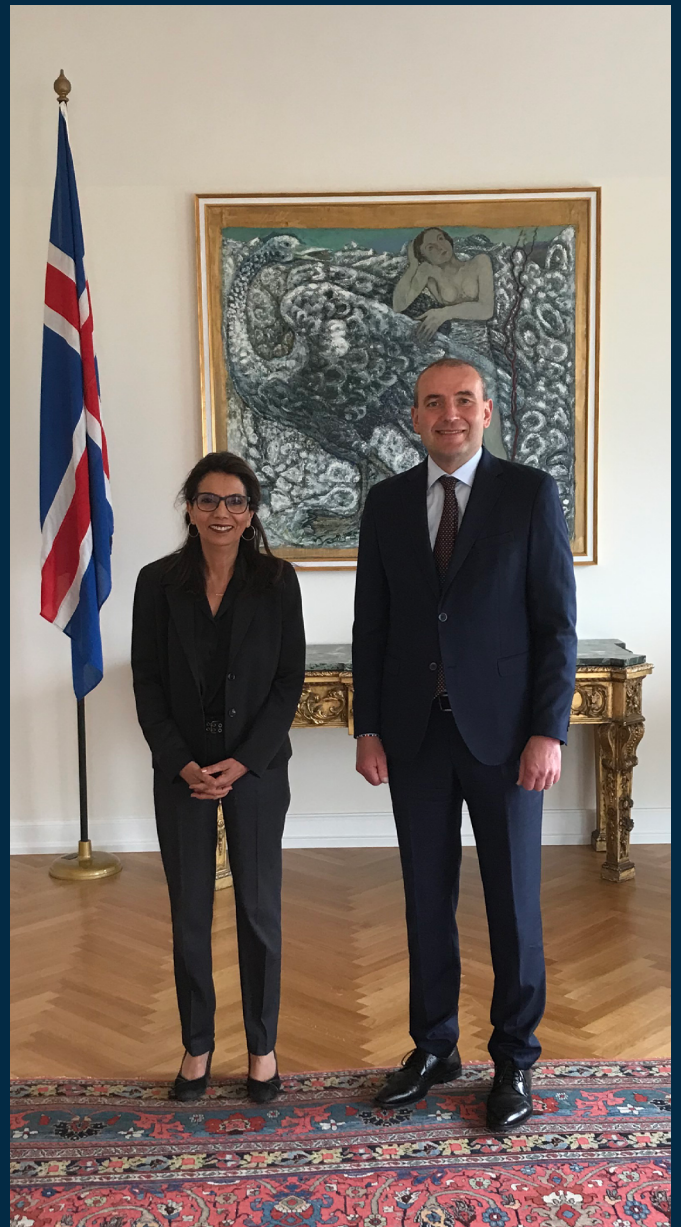
Advocacy and advisory services at the national level remain critical components of the work of the Special Representative. As travel restrictions eased, she resumed in-person country visits at the invitation of States and in close cooperation with permanent missions in New York and with resident coordinators and United Nations country teams. Country missions provide a key entry point for the Special Representative to have an intensive engagement



with stakeholders at the subregional, national and local levels, so as to accelerate the implementation of commitments to end violence against children; promote investment in cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention; and promote the sharing of experiences among Member States.

As part of her working methods during country missions, the Special Representative meets with children, especially those at increased risk of experiencing violence; the Head of State or Government; relevant ministers; parliamentarians; representatives of national human rights institutions; civil society actors; community and religious leaders; local authorities; public service providers; representatives of multilateral financial institutions, the corporate sector and the donor community; and members of the media. The Special Representative's country missions conclude with the preparation of a road map or outline for follow-up engagement, closely coordinated with national authorities and United Nations partners on the ground. Such missions are also complemented by virtual engagements with key stakeholders at the national and local levels.

In November 2021, the Special Representative visited the Niger and Chad as follow-up to the support provided by her Office for the preparation of their voluntary national reviews submitted for the 2021 high-level political forum. During her visit to the Niger, the Special Representative welcomed the commitment to prioritize education in order to end gender-based violence and child marriage and facilitated the sharing of promising practices to ensure safe, inclusive and empowering education, including the regulation of Qur'anic schools in the region. In Chad, the Special





Representative emphasized the importance of children's participation in the design of the national dialogue on the new constitution and, at the request of the President of Chad, provided technical support to address the issue of children in street situations. The Special Representative also met with children during her visit, including a group of girls and adolescents, called the "Super Banats", leading community action to raise awareness about gender-based violence, child marriage and sexual reproductive health. In July 2022, a young representative of the group was invited to participate in the high-level political forum plenary session focused on solutions to problems in Africa, in coordination with the Economic and Social Council, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and UNICEF Chad.

The Special Representative visited Jordan and Lebanon in December 2021. The visit to Jordan served to inform the country's efforts to mainstream children's rights in its 2022 voluntary national review and the voluntary local report of the Municipality of Amman – the first voluntary local review in the Arab world. During her visit, the Special Representative also provided input for the United Nations country team's submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in relation to the country's periodic report under that Convention, in addition to supporting the adoption of the draft bill on child rights and the preparation of an analysis of the return on investing in implementing the legislation. The visit to Lebanon served to inform the development of a workplan on child rights at the request of the Resident Coordinator to guide synergetic United Nations action, given the complex situation in the country and the development of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for 2023–2025. As part of the follow-up to the visit, UNICEF



and the Government of Lebanon will convene a high-level policy forum in November 2022, during which the Prime Minister will launch a call to action for children in Lebanon and commit his Government to the development of a national plan of action for all children, to be implemented through a strengthened child-rights governance system.

As a follow-up to her virtual country visit to the Philippines in 2021, the Special Representative met in person with the Presidential Human Rights Committee and the Council for the Welfare of Children in March 2022. The Special Representative was updated on the implementation of the outcome statement of the high-level dialogue on ending violence against children, to which she had contributed during her previous engagement. The Special Representative provided strategic advice on the steps needed to accelerate implementation of the commitments set forth in the outcome statement and offered her continued support for the process.

During a visit to Austria in April 2022, the Special Representative and national partners discussed reforms relating to violence against children, including implementation of recommendations of the Child Welfare Commission on the practical application of the “best interests” principle in asylum proceedings. The Special Representative encouraged the Austrian authorities to accelerate the reform of the guardianship system for unaccompanied children in order to ensure that no child goes missing. She also connected the Austrian authorities with girl- and women-led organizations in Africa and the Middle East to facilitate collaboration in the area of ending gender-based violence, including child marriage and female genital mutilation.

In April 2022, the Special Representative visited Greece and engaged with the Government on its national action plan for the protection of the rights of the child for the period 2021–2023. Together with relevant ministries, the Special Representative assessed progress made towards addressing the situation of unaccompanied children through the establishment of a national emergency response mechanism for those in precarious living conditions, as well as the impact and implementation of the abolition of protective custody for such children. The Special Representative held discussions on the finalization of the country’s 2022 voluntary national review and emphasized the importance of using the process to mainstream children’s rights in Sustainable Development Goal implementation. During the high-level political forum, she met with the delegation of Greece and discussed ways to further strengthen the mainstreaming of child rights in the follow-up to the review.



The Special Representative also visited Romania in April 2022. She engaged with national authorities on the legal and institutional framework for guaranteeing the protection and well-being of children, including the critical progress made towards implementing alternatives to institutionalization. The Special

Representative valued the country's response to refugee children from institutions in Ukraine and applauded ongoing efforts by the State, local authorities and key partners, including United Nations entities and civil society organizations, in that regard. The Special Representative welcomed the analysis carried out in Romania on the cost-effectiveness of a minimum package of services for the most vulnerable children and their caregivers, including cash, care and protection.

At the invitation of the Queen of the Belgians, the Special Representative was a keynote speaker at the high-level national symposium on mental health for children and youth, held in June 2022, during which she shared global experiences to inform the strengthening of the mental health system in Belgium.

The Special Representative's visit to Iceland in June 2022 built upon her Office's long-standing engagement with regard to the development of legislation and policies to support the prosperity of children, underpinned by an analysis of the high return on investing in cross-sectoral violence prevention and protection services. The Special Representative

will continue to build bridges between Iceland and other Member States to facilitate peer learning and the sharing of good practices in this field.

The Special Representative's next planned missions will be undertaken in Africa, in Latin America and the Caribbean and in the Asia-Pacific region.



Regional Engagement

The Special Representative continues to strengthen her collaboration with regional and subregional mechanisms of the African Union, regional economic communities and the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Africa to implement joint actions, including country visits, advocacy, the sharing of promising practices and enhancing South-South and subregional cooperation.

In November 2021, the Special Representative attended the third African Girls' Summit, on accelerating the elimination of harmful practices, hosted by the Niger and the Department of Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development of the African Union Commission. Since the Summit, and in close collaboration with the Department through its Harmful Practices Unit and partners, the Special Representative is following up and providing technical support to ensure the implementation, at the regional level, of the call to action adopted at the conclusion of the Summit.

The Special Representative has continued to strengthen collaboration with regional actors in the Middle East and North Africa, by working closely with the League of Arab States, including through her participation in the seventeenth session of the League's Subcommittee on Violence against Children, held in September 2021, and by supporting peer learning on violence prevention practices, while addressing specific needs on the protection agenda in the Arab world.

In May 2022, the Special Representative and the Special Representative and Coordinator

for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe organized a joint round table with anti-trafficking coordinators and child protection agencies from Ukraine and from States hosting refugee children from that country. Although temporary protection measures by host countries and expressions of solidarity have been remarkable, the crisis has also reinforced the need for equal treatment for all children and for avoiding double standards in access to services and in the level of care provided based on the child's status or country of origin. Lessons from the past and from the ongoing crisis will serve to inform the development of an advocacy brief to address the challenges involved in the coordination and effective protection of all children, irrespective of their status, in cross-border contexts.

The Special Representative contributed to the development of the new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027) and participated in its high-level launch in April 2022. In June 2022, the Special Representative met with representatives of the European Union in Brussels and identified avenues for deeper cooperation with the European Union, including the strengthening of the child protection system, child participation, child-friendly justice and the protection of children on the move. The Special Representative reiterated the critical importance of the recently launched Strategy, in which the Council reaffirms that children's rights are universal, that every person below 18 years of age should enjoy the same rights without discrimination of any kind and that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, so as to ensure that all children, irrespective of their status, including migratory

A young boy with short dark hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, is pointing his right index finger directly at the camera. He has a slight smile. In the background, other children in similar blue shirts are visible, and a blue banner with white Chinese text is partially seen. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

*Investing
in child
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status, receive the same protection throughout the territory of the European Union.

The Special Representative has continued to contribute to the monitoring and implementation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children and other regional frameworks relating to violence against children, through her regular participation in the meetings of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children.

In October 2021, the Special Representative participated in the launch of a Latin American and Caribbean regional observatory to gather and analyse official data from 13 countries on early pregnancy; child, early and forced marriages; and gender-based violence. The aim is to highlight State efforts to improve evidence on the protection of girls and provide an opportunity to document and build common practices across Latin American and Caribbean States.



United Nations

The reinvigorated United Nations resident coordinator system and the United Nations development system reform present new opportunities for mainstreaming and integrating into practice the protection of children across the human rights, development and peace and security pillars. The Special Representative met regularly with resident coordinators and United Nations country teams to focus on violence in common country analyses and strategic outcomes in the preparation of the new generation of United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks, as a way to support States in their commitments to end violence against children and engage with human rights mechanisms.

As Chair of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children, the Special Representative convenes regular meetings to ensure information-sharing and the implementation of joint road maps with United Nations partners. In addition, she convenes meetings on specific themes, the most recent of which was dedicated to the strengthening of child safeguarding mechanisms in sport through an engagement with the Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

The Special Representative has further deepened her strong collaboration with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, issuing joint statements and pursuing joint advocacy on situations of relevance to the three mandates,



such as Ukraine, sharing information on country visits and ensuring complementary action on the continuum of violence before, during and after conflicts.

As a member of the Inter - Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, the Office of the Special Representative provided input on the joint submission issued for the public consultation on the revision of the European Union directive on combating trafficking in human beings and takes part in other initiatives within the Coordination Group.

On 14 February 2022, on the occasion of Safer Internet Day, the International Telecommunication Union and the Office of the Special Representative, together with United Nations agencies, civil society, academia and the private sector, launched the “Protection through Online Participation” initiative to understand how children and young people use online means to obtain access to safety and protection, such as peer-to-peer support. The initiative is currently helping to map protection services that provide online support for children and young people and child- and youth-led online protection solutions, in order to assess their effectiveness and identify the benefits and challenges of online approaches.

In preparation for the Transforming Education Summit, to be held in September 2022, the Special Representative and the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth invited Member States to consult and involve children and young people. The Special Representative will continue to collaborate with the Envoy on Youth, in particular on the development of a youth declaration to be presented at the Summit.

As follow - up to General Assembly

resolution 75/166 on protecting children from bullying, the Special Representative was a keynote speaker at the World Anti-Bullying Forum 2021, contributing to the sharing of knowledge and experiences in tackling bullying. Significantly, participants at the Forum proposed a revised definition of bullying, to include not only the digital dimension, but also the role of culture and norms, and highlighted the need for a participatory and inclusive approach to the problem, involving schools and communities.



Civil society organizations

The Special Representative continued her systematic engagement with local, regional and global civil society organizations, child-led initiatives and faith-based organizations through regular updates and joint and complementary advocacy, events and campaigns, as well as in the context of country visits. That joint action is aimed at maintaining momentum surrounding the protection of children from violence, building the case for investing in violence prevention and mainstreaming children's rights in the work of the United Nations and other stakeholders. The Special Representative also collaborates with civil society actors, including children themselves, to advocate in favour of children's involvement in decision-making processes, thus amplifying their voices and actions, and to consult with children on the work of the office.



SRSG Maalla M'jid addresses the General Assembly of Terre des Hommes

Children and youth

The Special Representative has directly engaged with more than 1,000 children from various regions and diverse backgrounds over the past year, through multiple avenues. In March 2022, she shared a [child-friendly version of her annual report](#) to the Human Rights Council with children, ahead of an interactive dialogue with more than 450 children from around the world, co-organized with civil society partners and held on the margins of the forty-ninth session of the Council. The Special Representative shared the feedback from the engagement with children in her interactive dialogue with Member States during the Council session, in addition to providing feedback to children on her engagement with the Council. The Special Representative will continue this practice systematically with her [annual reports](#) to both the [General Assembly](#) and the Council.

The Office of the Special Representative has undertaken a mapping of children's initiatives from around the world over the past two years, which is available on its [website](#). To strengthen that mapping exercise, the Special Representative launched the “[Let's Tell the World](#)” social media campaign, inviting children everywhere to tell the world how they are making it better and safer.



A photograph of a group of people in a community setting, all wearing face masks. A woman on the left, wearing a striped shirt and a blue mask, is gesturing with her hand. A man in the center, wearing a blue mask and a dark jacket, is looking towards her. In the foreground, a young man with a black mask is looking down. The background is filled with various items, including a sign that says "CORPS".

*We have
no time to
lose to
achieve
a safe,
inclusive
and
healthy
world.*

Ending the deprivation of liberty of children



As mandated by the General Assembly, the Special Representative continues her work to end the deprivation of liberty of children, as Chair of the United Nations inter-agency task force on the global study on children deprived of liberty, working closely with Member States, the Non-Governmental Organizations Panel on Children Deprived of Liberty and other relevant stakeholders.

Preventing and ending the deprivation of liberty of children is possible. As highlighted in the previous reports of the Special Representative to the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, there is a wealth of experience from Member States adopting child rights-based alternative solutions to deprivation of liberty. There has also been significant progress made in areas such as raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility; ensuring child- and gender-sensitive justice; and the better use of technology and other innovations to ensure and increase children's access to justice. In addition, many countries are implementing child rights-based solutions to end institutionalization and investing more in family strengthening and community-based programmes. Those strides forward are increasingly being highlighted in States' peer learning exchanges and voluntary national reviews on Sustainable Development Goal implementation. Now is the time to scale up and sustain those practices, in all countries and regions, to ensure that no child is left behind.

In 2021, the task force prioritized child immigration detention as its key theme and considered it important to address the topic at the International Migration Review Forum, held in May 2022. As Chair of the task force, the Special Representative strengthened collaboration to end child immigration detention with partners at every level, including

Member States, United Nations country teams, the United Nations Network on Migration and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, as well as regional organizations, civil society organizations and national human rights institutions.

The task force was actively engaged in the first International Migration Review Forum, working closely with Member States to ensure that child rights would be at the core of the outcome declaration issued by the Forum. The Progress Declaration of the International Migration Review Forum, adopted on 20 May, included specific references to child rights to strengthen the implementation of the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, including steps to end the immigration detention of children, thereby advancing efforts to protect and respect the best interests of the child (General Assembly resolution 76/266).

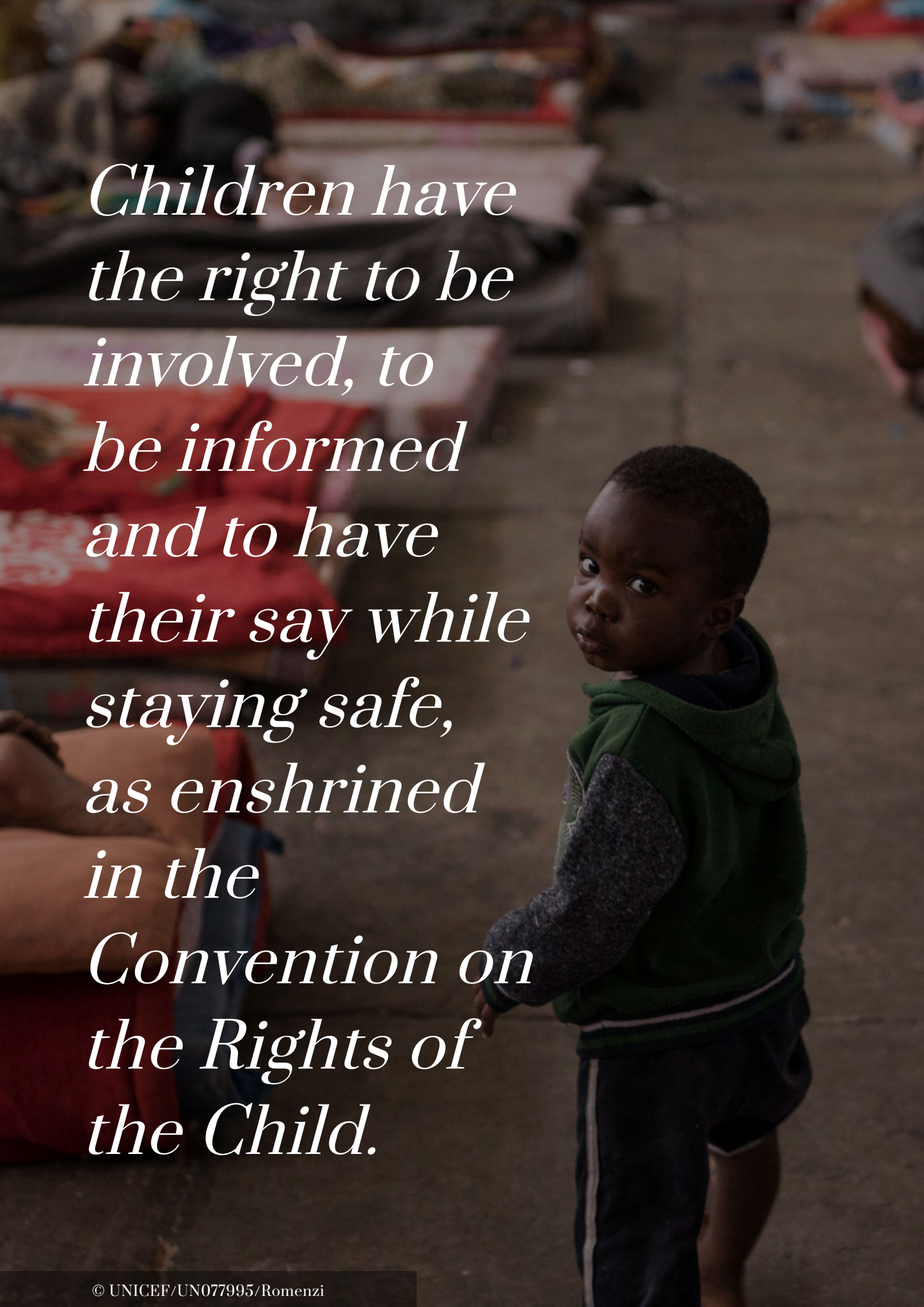
The task force submitted a joint pledge to support the implementation of the Global Compact, in particular objective 13 with regard to ending the immigration detention of children. Through the pledge, the task force commits itself to conducting evidence-based advocacy and mobilizing all key stakeholders to end the detention of children in the context of migration; supporting Member States in prohibiting the practice; supporting the collection of data and the dissemination of promising practices on the issue; and amplifying the voices of migrant children in determining their best interests.

In November 2022, the Special Representative, together with the Non Governmental Organizations Panel on Children Deprived of Liberty, Member States and academia, will co-organize a global forum on justice for children and deprivation of liberty, to

be held in Mauritania, in order to share promising practices and remaining challenges, which will allow for the development of a joint road map

to prevent and end all forms of deprivation of liberty of children.



A young child with dark skin and short hair, wearing a green hoodie with grey sleeves and dark shorts, stands in a cluttered outdoor environment. The child is looking back over their right shoulder towards the camera. The background is filled with various items on the ground, including what appears to be a red bag or blanket. The lighting is soft and natural, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

*Children have
the right to be
involved, to
be informed
and to have
their say while
staying safe,
as enshrined
in the
Convention on
the Rights of
the Child.*

The climate crisis: a threat multiplier for violence against children



The climate crisis is one of the major global challenges of the present time. Following the February 2022 release of the Working Group II contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Secretary-General described that report as “an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership”. Rising sea levels, devastating floods, cyclones, air pollution, global warming, extreme weather events, desertification, deforestation, catastrophic droughts, fires, storms and loss of biodiversity are fast becoming the new normal.

According to UNICEF, as indicated in its first child-focused climate risk index, 1 billion children are at extremely high risk of being affected by the climate crisis, of whom 820 million (over one third of children globally) are currently highly exposed to heatwaves, 400 million (nearly 1 in 6) to cyclones, 330 million (1 in 7) to riverine flooding, 240 million (1 in 10) to coastal flooding, and 920 million (over one third) to water scarcity.

Children are more vulnerable to climate and environmental shocks than adults, especially the poorest, the most disadvantaged and those living in high-risk and fragile contexts.

The cumulative shocks of the climate crisis are exacerbating pre-existing crises, including the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, financial crises and armed conflicts, and aggravating risk factors for experiencing violence, abuse and exploitation, such as poverty, economic and social inequalities, food insecurity and forced displacement. In that way, the climate crisis is acting as a threat multiplier for violence against children.

The Special Representative considers it critical to draw attention to the urgent need to

protect children and their rights in response to the climate crisis, which is also indispensable to achieving the 2030 Agenda. That urgency has been confirmed by the numerous contributions received in preparation for this report. The Special Representative is very grateful for all submissions received from Member States and for the consultations held with various stakeholders, including the United Nations, civil society, academia and children, from which she has drawn illustrative examples for the present report. The Special Representative will launch and disseminate an in-depth study on the theme by the end of the present year.



Poorest and disadvantaged children hit the hardest by climate crisis

The World Bank has estimated that up to 132 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty by 2030 as a result of climate change: 44 million owing to the impact on health; 33.5 million owing to the impact on food prices; and 18.2 million owing to the impact of disasters. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, 39.7 million additional people – more than in any other region in the world – could be pushed into extreme poverty by 2030 as a result of climate change. Poorer children and families are less able to obtain access to key resources when crises occur, creating a vicious cycle that pushes the most vulnerable children deeper into poverty at the same time as increasing their risk of experiencing the worst and most life-threatening effects of climate change. Under those conditions, children are exposed to greater risk of violence and exploitation, including as a result of engaging in survival behaviours and negative coping mechanisms, as further outlined below.

Poorer households are less resilient to financial hardships when climate shocks hit, which can increase the risk of interrupted education. Families without access to affordable credit spend less on their children's education during periods of crisis (for example, on school fees, learning materials or transportation) and are more likely to temporarily withdraw children from school, with less learning time available at home, leading to significant interruptions in education. Girls and young women shoulder additional burdens of household work in times of crisis, amplifying their risk of dropping out of school. Food shortages and stresses on clean

water supplies in times of drought and flooding also affect young people's daily activities. Additional household work, such as walking farther to collect drinking water and firewood or extra childcare responsibilities when children are unable to go to school, often fall on girls and young women, further reducing their own time to study and increasing their risk of dropping out of school altogether.

Displacement is occurring on an unprecedented scale. Millions of children around the world are internally or externally displaced, driven from their homes by the impacts of slow-onset disasters, environmental degradation and sudden-onset disasters exacerbated by climate change. In 2020, disasters – including storms and flooding – triggered three times more internal displacements than violent conflicts. The World Bank estimates that the number of internal climate migrants could surpass 216 million by 2050, with approximately 86 million people displaced within sub-Saharan Africa alone. Every year, more than 50,000 people in the Pacific flee their homes to escape the devastating impacts. In Latin America and the Caribbean, climate change has internally displaced more than 4.2 million people in 18 countries. By 2050, South Asia could see as many as 40 million internal climate migrants; North Africa, 19 million; and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 5 million.

Displaced children are more likely to be victims of various forms of violence at all stages of their journey. In addition, displaced children continue to lack access to humanitarian assistance and services; risk being deprived of liberty because of their or their parents' migrant status, under policies that criminalize irregular migration; and face discrimination and the possibility of statelessness.

A young girl stands in the foreground, looking directly at the camera. She is wearing a bright yellow dress with black and white circular patterns. She is barefoot and holding a large, yellow, rectangular plastic water container. In the background, several other people, including children, are visible, some wearing colorful headscarves. The setting appears to be a dry, dusty area, possibly a refugee camp or a rural area affected by drought. The sky is overcast.

The climate crisis is acting as a threat multiplier magnifying children's exposure and vulnerability to violence, exploitation and abuses.

Natural disasters bring environmentally induced changes in supervision, accompaniment and child separation; the transgression of social norms in post-disaster behaviour; economic stress; and insecure shelter and living conditions – all of which constitute significant pathways to violence against children.

The climate crisis is both strongly intersectional and deeply unequal in its impact. It disproportionately affects communities in hotspots that are hardest hit by and least responsible for the crisis. The disruptive effects of climate change on the capacities of social services and communities to prevent and respond to violence are felt most keenly in countries with the fewest resources to adapt and remain resilient, especially as they contend with other challenges: almost all of the extremely high-risk countries with regard to the climate crisis are also considered fragile contexts, and one quarter of them have very high levels of displacement, with more than 5 per cent of the population displaced.

Moreover, not all groups of children are affected in the same way. Children who are already in disadvantaged situations are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including children deprived of family care; children with disabilities; children living in poverty or in rural areas; children in humanitarian and conflict settings; and those who rely on and have a close relationship with the natural environment and its resources, such as indigenous children. Given their strong connection to nature, some 400 million indigenous peoples face threats to practising both their cultural rights and their collective rights. Girls and young women are also disproportionately affected by climate change. This is especially true for those in rural

areas, who represent up to 70 per cent of the agricultural workforce in some countries, owing to their social roles and the discrimination they suffer.

As the climate crisis overlaps with other crises, intersects with other vulnerabilities and exacerbates major risk factors, it is magnifying the threat of violence against children, including gender-based violence, child marriage, child labour, abduction, trafficking, sexual violence and recruitment into criminal, armed and/or violent extremist groups.

Studies in South Asian countries and the Pacific islands, for example, show surges in child marriage following weather-related natural disasters. Recent reports and studies on Africa, Asia and Latin America indicate that extreme weather phenomena and the loss of income owing to crop damage increase the demand for child labour. In addition, traffickers, criminal networks and armed and terrorist groups are taking advantage of those vulnerabilities to sell, exploit and recruit children.

The climate crisis is also harming children's mental health. Eco-anxiety refers to distress caused by climate change, whereby people are becoming anxious about their future. It is causing negative emotions in children and young people worldwide. As they are extremely vulnerable to climate change, children face environmental stressors and become better able to understand climate change and its anticipated impacts, intensifying their capacity to experience stress and anxiety about the consequences of climate change.

Child-sensitive responses to the climate crisis are needed more than ever

The climate crisis is being addressed at the global, regional and national levels, through a wide range of high-level political commitments, treaties, resolutions, frameworks, policies and agreements.

That global framework includes the Paris Agreement, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Task Force on Displacement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the Children’s Rights and Business Principles, the World Bank Environmental and Social Framework and the forthcoming general comment No. 26 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on children’s rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has highlighted how climate action must be consistent with existing international human rights obligations, including through having the highest ambition possible to prevent harms related to climate change from worsening; to build resilience equitably and reduce risks faced by those most threatened by climate change; and to ensure accountability and access to effective remedies for those affected by climate change.

Policy frameworks and normative standards addressing different dimensions of the climate crisis have also been developed at the regional level, including the African Union Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022–2032); the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the

Child (2022–2027); the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement); the recommendations adopted by ASEAN addressing children’s right to a healthy environment and child-sensitive climate actions; and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

Initiatives at the national level encompass significant legal reform and policy frameworks enhancing and highlighting the impact on children. Some countries are adopting climate constitutionalism, framing climate concerns in the language of constitutional rights. The Philippines has positioned children within its policy frameworks on climate change, including in its Climate Change Act (Republic Act No. 9729), National Climate Change Action Plan (2011–2028), Children’s Emergency Relief and Protection Act (Republic Act No. 10821) and Comprehensive Emergency Programme for Children. Similarly, through its national programme for the protection of children and adolescents for the period 2021–2024, Mexico aims to protect the rights of children and adolescents, by ensuring that they are equipped to face natural disasters and other risks. In its national climate change policy, Ghana recognizes the stronger impact of climate change on women and girls and aims to enhance their resilience through, for example, better access to social protection.

Other countries acutely affected by climate change are focusing on climate-related displacement. For example, through its 2018 national policy on climate change and disaster-induced displacement, Vanuatu aims to minimize the impact of displacement and ensure assistance and protection at all stages, in particular for women and children. Fiji enacted the Climate Relocation of Communities Trust

Fund Act 2019 to fund and support the planned relocation of communities in Fiji that are severely affected by climate change and ensure that there is a clear funding system in place that can be used to assist communities in Fiji when relocation becomes necessary. In Antigua and Barbuda, school contingency plans are developed to map vulnerabilities to the impact of climate change and capacities to respond.

Education, climate literacy and awareness-raising initiatives are also a critical component of climate action. Serbia has promoted its national platform, “Čuvam te”, (“I keep you safe”), through which educational texts on the prevention of and protection from violence are uploaded for parents and teachers. In Colombia, the National School of Environmental Training is promoting strategies on environmental culture that have been created with the participation of citizens, including children. Saint Kitts and Nevis has also announced its commitment to encourage the involvement of children and youth in decision-making processes on climate change.

Although States are the primary duty bearers of rights, businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights and do no harm, especially as business activity has been the source of significant environmental damage that affect children’s living conditions, health, development and well-being. In 2021, the business community released a statement on the vital role that businesses play in addressing the devastating impacts of climate change on children’s well-being. In the statement, issued during the International Chamber of Commerce Make Climate Action Everyone’s Business Forum, business signatories acknowledge that child rights and the environment are interconnected that and businesses should be part of the solution to address and mitigate the negative

consequences of climate change in children’s lives globally.

Despite those initiatives, more needs to be done to make responses to the climate crisis child-sensitive. According to UNICEF, only 42 per cent of all nationally determined contributions contain direct references to children or young people, and only 20 per cent contain a mention of children specifically. Less than 2 per cent contain a mention of the rights of children. However, 11 of 13 national adaptation plans contain explicit references to children or young people, with both viewed as vulnerable groups and as beneficiaries in terms of education and health interventions. For instance, in their national adaptation plans, Fiji and Zimbabwe set out specific child-sensitive measures with respect to needs assessments and action plans, health and protection measures in the context of extreme weather events and climate-sensitive diseases.

In addition to greater attention being paid to children and their rights in legal frameworks and action plans and through awareness-raising initiatives, there is also a need for greater investment in adaptation and resilience. Investing in cross-sectoral child-sensitive climate policies that address the specific risks to and vulnerabilities of children and the drivers of violence linked to climate change is essential to finding mid- and long-term sustainable solutions in order to overturn global negative trends. Investments in children’s services can considerably reduce overall climate risk for children worldwide. UNICEF estimates that investments that improve access to health and nutrition services can considerably reduce overall climate risk for 460 million children; those that improve educational outcomes can reduce the risk for 275 million children; and those that improve access to social protection



and reduce poverty can reduce the risk for 310 million children.

Developing countries are especially affected by the impacts of climate change. They are hit hardest because they are more vulnerable to the damaging effects of hazardous phenomena, and they have lower coping capacity and may need more time to rebuild and recover. According to the Global Climate Risk Index 2021, 8 of the 10 countries most affected by the quantified impacts of extreme weather events in 2019 belong to the low- to lower-middle-income category. Half of them are least developed countries. Moreover, there is an additional major deficit in that respect, with countries at extremely high risk of the experiencing the negative impacts of climate change receiving only \$9.8 billion in global financial flows, mostly in the form of official development assistance. Cooperation, multilateralism and international solidarity need to be strengthened in order to fortify the resilience of the countries most vulnerable to climate crisis.



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Children are part of the solution

Investing in children also means involving, empowering and listening to them as part of the solution to tackling the climate crisis. Children are increasingly making their voices heard and acting at the forefront of climate action worldwide, through social media activity, community and civic engagement, participation in climate negotiations, child-led strikes, peaceful protests and social mobilization movements, despite the barriers they face.

In Peru, in 2012, a seven-year-old boy created the first bank for children, the Eco Banco del Estudiante. The bank turns trash that children find on the streets into money, which is then uploaded into their accounts. The bank helps to protect the environment, build children's capacities and reduce child poverty, child labour and school dropout rates.

In South Africa, Scouts have filled trucks with rubbish from Durban harbour; in Greece, they have cleaned beaches; and in Croatia, they have planted more than 65,000 trees. In the United Arab Emirates, two adolescent siblings started a campaign, entitled "Papers, E-wastes, Plastics and Cans", and mobilized their school, peers and parents, collecting approximately 15,000 kg of waste on a monthly basis. In Uganda, children and young people repurpose used water bottles as containers for home-made liquid soap, which they sell to help to support their families.

In Fiji, children and young people have developed a climate-smart solution to combat coastal erosion, having identified rising sea levels as a problem. Having received a seed grant,

they planted and maintained mangrove trees to allow the coast to recover. In 16 countries across the Latin America and Caribbean region, the "Tremendas" network, led by adolescent girls, has launched the Academia Climáticas platform to deliver climate education to girls and young women and build a network to identify local needs and solutions to the climate crisis.

As environmental and human rights defenders, children are also increasingly using the justice system as a strong and powerful tool to demand climate justice. Young activists across various regions have been involved in legal proceedings to demand more ambitious emissions cuts to safeguard their future; to require an assessment of the impact of fossil fuel extraction on children; and to stop deforestation, among other examples.

Despite those and many other examples of child participation, the barriers remain considerable. Acting as environmental and human rights defenders brings risks for children, such as being criminalized, silenced, threatened and stigmatized. Negative cultural and social norms with regard to their right to have a voice in the decisions that affect them and attitudes that limit their ability to engage remain widespread. This underscores the importance of redoubling efforts to ensure that children are provided with safe pathways to gain access to information, express themselves and become involved in climate action and decision-making processes.



The way forward



Too many children worldwide are still left behind. More children than ever are facing extreme poverty, discrimination and social inequalities. More children than ever are forcibly displaced, fleeing conflicts, widespread violence and food insecurity. The climate crisis has aggravated these risks. Taken together, those multiple crises are exacerbating children's vulnerabilities to violence. No country is immune, and no child is immune.

Exposure to the climate crisis, violence, stress and other crises causes immediate and long-term physiological and psychological damage. The consequences can last a lifetime. Children, especially the poorest children, those deprived of family care, displaced children, those living in rural and remote areas, indigenous children, children with disabilities, children from minority groups, children living in conflict areas and in humanitarian settings and girls, may not reach their full education and health potential, which will limit their future income and productivity and affect human capital development. In addition to the human cost, a huge financial toll is paid by its victims and by societies.

Climate change and development are inextricably linked. Action on climate change is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and requires integrated action across social, economic and environmental spheres.

A paradigm shift is needed to achieve that. Spending on integrated and cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive services must be seen as an investment and an essential step to ensuring the adaptation and resilience of social services in the face of the climate crisis. That includes social welfare, protection and care services; safe and

inclusive education, including digital learning; physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health services; justice; and support and sustainable social protection for vulnerable families and communities.

That investment is not only the foundation for global efforts to build back better in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the other crises outlined above. It is key to building safe, just, inclusive and resilient societies, for and with children. Increased pressure on public finances cannot be used to justify a lack of investment in children. Given the overwhelming evidence on the dangers and causes of climate crisis, failing to take action is an injustice to all children.

To address that injustice, Governments, the business sector and the international community must adopt and implement child-sensitive climate laws and policies, with dedicated resources and robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The Special Representative welcomes the recent adoption of resolution 76/300, in which the General Assembly recognized the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, as a means to help to reduce environmental injustices, close protection gaps and empower people, especially those that are in vulnerable situations, including environmental human rights defenders, children, youth, women and indigenous peoples.

Children and young people must be involved in the implementation and development of those policies, including the most vulnerable and most highly affected. Strengthening their capacities, investing in climate change and environmental education and equipping children to be part of the solution in disaster risk reduction and climate mitigation efforts is key to ensuring sustainable solutions.

With less than eight years remaining to keep the promise of the 2030 Agenda, the clock is ticking. All stakeholders must work together in a coordinated manner and using an integrated approach to tackle climate change in order to prevent and reduce its impact on children. Cooperation and multilateralism need to be strengthened, based on mutual partnerships and accountability, as most of the countries at greatest risk are those who are least responsible. Climate justice and social justice are needed more than ever, for all children, leaving no one behind.





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