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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

Summary

In the present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 76/147, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Najat Maalla M'jid, reviews actions she has taken at the global, regional and national levels to fulfil her mandate. She provides an overview of the results achieved and an update on her work since her previous report, and emphasizes that the need for investment in cross-sectoral services to ensure children's protection and well-being is more urgent than ever. The report also focuses on the need to protect all children on the move in times of crisis, independently of their status.



I. Introduction

1. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, guided by General Assembly resolution 62/141, is an independent global 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 her mandate in promoting further implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children¹ and in supporting Member States in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Assembly has also expressed appreciation for the leadership of the Special Representative in the follow-up to the United Nations global study on children deprived of liberty² and has encouraged her to continue her work in that area.

2. 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 emphasizes that the need to prevent and respond effectively to violence against children is more urgent than ever. Ending violence against children cannot wait, as violence continues to rise and becomes ever more normalized.

3. The Special Representative identifies global challenges that are increasing children's exposure and vulnerability to violence, with a focus on the protection of children on the move in times of crisis. She stresses in the report that with an unprecedented number of children being uprooted and displaced, the need to ensure the protection and well-being of all children on the move – independently of their status – is more pressing than ever.

4. The Special Representative invited Member States to inform the report by submitting information on initiatives related to the protection of children on the move and is very grateful for all the submissions received.³ The report has also benefited from contributions and inputs from a variety of partners, including members of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence Against Children, the United Nations task force on children deprived of liberty, civil society, and law enforcement agencies, and from children on the move themselves. The Special Representative is particularly grateful to the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti) for its dedicated contribution capturing the voices of migrant and displaced children.

II. Investment in child protection and well-being cannot wait

A. Children are paying a high price

5. Children's vulnerability to violence continues to be exacerbated worldwide by multiple and overlapping crises. With risks being magnified and responses failing to meet the scale of the challenge, the world is not on track to keep the promise made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to end all forms of violence against children. The world is also failing to uphold the principle that children must not be attacked and must always be protected.

6. The recent celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be a rallying call for the protection of the rights of all children, regardless of their status. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and all of its provisions should be upheld, with full determination to protect the rights and save the lives of millions of children worldwide who are at risk.

¹ [A/61/299](#).

² [A/74/136](#).

³ Submissions were received from Armenia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Mexico, Poland, Slovenia and Türkiye.

7. An estimated 1 in 6 children globally live in extreme poverty:⁴ a powerful driver of violence, including child labour, child marriage, child trafficking, children living in street situations, child sexual exploitation and the recruitment of children into criminal, armed and violent extremist groups. At the end of 2021, more than 1 in 6 children were living in conflict zones, the highest proportion in 20 years.⁵ The cumulative shocks of the climate crisis also exacerbate ongoing crises and act as threat multipliers for violence against children. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 1 billion children are at extremely high risk of being affected by the climate crisis.⁶ Meanwhile, around 1.5 billion children under the age of 15 have no access to social protection, and progress on coverage has stalled worldwide since 2016.⁷

8. The data on violence against children are alarming. The latest global estimates suggest that the number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide.⁸ At least 200 million girls and women in 31 countries with data have undergone female genital mutilation.⁹ Around 12 million girls are married during their childhood each year and, on current trends, more than 100 million additional girls will marry before they turn 18 by 2030.¹⁰ Globally, around 1 in 5 adolescent girls have experienced recent intimate partner violence.¹¹ In most countries, more than two thirds of children are subjected to violent discipline by caregivers.¹² An estimated 105 in every 100,000 children are in residential care worldwide¹³ and according to UNICEF, more than 1 million children worldwide are estimated to be deprived of their liberty by law enforcement officials.¹⁴ Research published by *The Lancet* in 2022 covering 25 countries showed that 31.7 per cent of children with disabilities had experienced violence and that they were twice as likely to face violence.¹⁵ Children account for 35 per cent of all identified victims of trafficking.¹⁶ Online risks to children are mounting: recent evidence shows that 15 per cent of children have reported cyberbullying victimization, and that 32 million reports of child sexual abuse images were identified by electronic service providers in 2022.¹⁷

B. Fifteen years on: stronger action needed more than ever

9. Fifteen years after the establishment of the mandate of the Special Representative, the need for stronger action to prevent violence against children remains urgent. The Special Representative continues to use her mandate to advance children's protection from violence through her advocacy, advisory and bridge-building roles. In doing so, she emphasizes the need to move away from siloed approaches to effective violence prevention that addresses the root causes and drivers of violence across the life cycle, and that builds an integrated set of social services around children and families.

10. While promoting holistic action to tackle all forms of violence and their drivers, the Special Representative has focused on specific areas – including the investment case for

⁴ See <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-bearing-brunt-stalled-progress-extreme-poverty-reduction-worldwide>.

⁵ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/speeches/2022/07/children-affected-armed-conflict-and-violence>.

⁶ See www.unicef.org/media/105376/file/UNICEF-climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis.pdf.

⁷ See https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_869608.pdf.

⁸ See <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-labour-2020-global-estimates-trends-and-the-road-forward/>.

⁹ See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/>.

¹⁰ See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>.

¹¹ See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/violent-unions/>.

¹² See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/violent-discipline/>.

¹³ See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/children-alternative-care/>.

¹⁴ See <https://www.unicef.org/protection/justice-for-children>.

¹⁵ See [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(22\)00033-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(22)00033-5).

¹⁶ See www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTiP_2022_web.pdf and <https://publications.iom.int/books/global-estimates-modern-slavery-forced-labour-and-forced-marriage>.

¹⁷ See www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240062085.

ending violence; violence against children and the climate crisis; children in the digital environment; and the protection of children in the context of travel and tourism.

11. The investment case for ending violence against children is increasingly seen as a key dimension for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, following the presentation of the Special Representative's annual report to the Human Rights Council in March 2022,¹⁸ and she is particularly encouraged by this trend. She has engaged with many States across all regions to support the establishment and strengthening of integrated approaches to tackle violence against children, highlighting the high returns on investment in proven cost-effective cross-sectoral services. The Special Representative has facilitated peer-learning exchanges between officials in different States on how to assess returns on investment in integrated services to ensure children's protection and well-being. The Special Representative continues to document good practices and to develop guidance to assist States in undertaking such assessments, in the framework of a formal cooperation agreement with Iceland.

12. Building on her report to the General Assembly¹⁹ on the climate crisis and violence against children, the Special Representative has continued to promote and advocate for child-sensitive climate laws and mitigation policies that are backed by adequate resources and monitoring. She joined children and youth in their initiatives globally and at the regional level, and took part in the launch of general comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change, by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, to which the Special Representative contributed.

13. Following up on her report to the Human Rights Council on the protection of children in the digital environment,²⁰ the Special Representative continues to stress the need for strong legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure children's protection and privacy online. She contributes to ongoing law reform processes, such as the development of legislation by the European Union on the protection of children from sexual exploitation and abuse online. She has also highlighted the need to incorporate this dimension into the development of the Global Digital Compact and the elaboration of a comprehensive international convention to counter the use of information and communications technologies for criminal purposes. The Special Representative has continued to underline the need for the views and experiences of children to shape and inform action in this field, including by conducting an opinion poll of more than 600 children from different regions about their views on online safety in collaboration with the WeProtect Global Alliance. The results revealed that 80 per cent of child respondents thought that they were likely or very likely to experience things online that may harm them or make them feel unsafe. The children indicated that they wanted stronger laws to address this, and clear ways to report harmful and abusive content within online platforms.²¹

14. The Special Representative has promoted the importance of ensuring the protection of children from all forms of violence in the context of travel and tourism, including sexual exploitation, child labour and trafficking.²² There has never been a more pivotal moment to ensure that the travel and tourism sector is truly sustainable, as the sector continues to recover from the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Discussions on the sector's sustainability have rightly incorporated environmental, economic and social dimensions. However, child safety is also fundamental for sustainability. The Special Representative launched an advocacy brief on rethinking travel and tourism with child protection at its core at a high-level event co-hosted with Sweden and the Dominican Republic on the margins of the General Assembly, with the participation of Queen Silvia of Sweden, representatives of Member States, law enforcement agencies and the private sector, and children, as well as international and local civil society organizations.

¹⁸ A/HRC/49/57.

¹⁹ A/77/221.

²⁰ A/HRC/52/61.

²¹ See https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/violence_against_children_and_the_digital_environment_cfv_hrc_2023_english.pdf.

²² A/78/214.

C. Wide mobilization on many fronts

15. In advocating for stronger action to prevent and respond to violence against children, the Special Representative has continued to support, mobilize and collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders at the global, regional and national levels.

Member States

16. The Special Representative continued her high-level engagement with and support to Member States, in keeping with her mandate from the General Assembly to act as a catalyst to stimulate the engagement of Member States and to support their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

17. The voluntary national review processes offer a key opportunity to identify and report on promising practices and initiatives to tackle violence against children in the context of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, and to ensure children's involvement in these efforts. The Special Representative developed and shared a suite of guidance materials and tools in 2023 and met with 33 Member States presenting their voluntary national reviews, as well as with the European Union – the first regional organization to present a voluntary review.²³ She also mobilized the United Nations system at the country level to help ensure relevant technical support.

18. The 2023 high-level political forum on sustainable development provided an opportunity for the Special Representative to highlight the strengthening of the protection of children from violence as key to achieving all Sustainable Development Goals. She also contributed to preparatory processes for the high-level political forum, including regional forums for sustainable development, the Second Global Workshop for Voluntary National Review Countries, and the expert group meeting on Sustainable Development Goal 9. During the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council, the Special Representative shared lessons learned in ensuring a “One United Nations” approach to resilient and sustainable development at the country level.

19. The Special Representative also used the opportunity of the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in September 2023 to stress that action to prevent violence against children was crucial for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Special Representative met with delegations from all regions attending the Summit, and took part in high-level events on diverse themes, including combating sexual violence against children, the protection of children online, supporting children and women as a key element of generating human capital, and unlocking girls' potential through education and empowerment.

20. In October 2023, the Board of the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children decided to sunset the Global Partnership in its existing form and to transition its workstreams to new arrangements. Recognizing the strong demand from partners for the workstream on pathfinding countries to be sustained and strengthened, the Special Representative was requested to lead this workstream, in line with her mandate to engage with and support States.

21. In close collaboration with the United Nations system and civil society partners, the Special Representative has begun a process of consultation on how to move forward with the pathfinding initiative, ensuring that the process is led and owned by Member States. Preparations are under way to take stock of progress and of remaining challenges, in order to better define in a participatory way a road map to accelerate and monitor action to end violence against children, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These consultations will also define an accountability framework for the pathfinding initiative. The Special Representative will work to ensure complementarity with other workstreams under transition that were established within the framework of the Global Partnership.

22. The number of invitations and requests for country visits continues to increase. Since her last report to the Human Rights Council, the Special Representative has visited Andorra,

²³ See <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/content/2030-childrens-rights-agenda>.

Fiji, Kenya, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Senegal, Solomon Islands and Thailand, as well as making follow-up visits to Iceland and Morocco.

23. The Special Representative's country visits are opportunities to engage with key stakeholders in a participatory way to enhance understanding of national and local child protection mechanisms; identify good practices for scale-up and actions to overcome challenges; and define the expertise and support needed to ensure children's protection and well-being. During her visits, the Special Representative meets Heads of State and Government, ministers, parliamentarians, national human rights institutions, officials and national authorities responsible for children's protection and well-being, children and young people, civil society and faith-based organizations, traditional and community leaders, members of the donor community, and United Nations country teams. She also visits a range of social services for children, as well as care institutions and places of detention.

24. The Special Representative's visits conclude with the identification of road maps for concrete actions by governments, United Nations regional offices, and country team and development partners, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches to violence prevention that strengthen national and local systems sustainably. The Special Representative emphasizes the need to reflect this approach in the development and implementation of United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks. Follow-up is assured by documenting and exchanging good practices and technical advice, connecting stakeholders in the countries visited with actors and experts in other jurisdictions, and facilitating peer exchanges among States.

25. The Special Representative welcomed high-level political commitments to invest in children's protection and well-being during all her visits and advocated for their translation into concrete action. These included commitments to expedite the adoption or strengthen the implementation of legal frameworks to prohibit violence against children in all settings and ensure effective coordination and accountability for the delivery of integrated services, for example in Kenya. The Special Representative also identified opportunities presented by significant law reform processes and new governments taking office to promote children's protection and well-being, such as in Luxembourg. The Special Representative provided guidance to further strengthen the integrated chain of services required to tackle violence against children, as seen in Latvia.

26. States have also taken important steps to ensure the integration of children's rights and well-being into public finance and budgeting frameworks, as is the case in Iceland. The Special Representative welcomed the initiatives in Fiji to assess the cost of violence against children and the high returns that can be achieved through effective violence prevention. In addition, in line with the Special Representative's advocacy during her visit to Fiji to move ahead with the child care and protection bill and the child justice bill, both pending since 2010, the Attorney General's Office moved to carry out nationwide consultations on the draft bills, both of which are now ready to be submitted to Parliament in early 2024.

27. The Special Representative's visits aim to mobilize and include a wide range of stakeholders in action to end violence. The strong role of religious and community leaders in efforts to tackle violence and in challenging social norms that condone or support violence, including but not limited to female genital mutilation and child marriage, was another area where her visits highlighted promising practices, as in Senegal.²⁴ The Special Representative has also reinforced the critical role of civil society partners and highlighted the need to strengthen their networks and advocacy capacity. She drew attention to the situation of children living and working on the streets in a range of countries, emphasizing the need for integrated, protective support systems for these children before, during and after their time on the street. In addition to progress on this issue, she welcomed steps taken to strengthen child protection systems during a follow-up country visit to Morocco.

28. While the Special Representative promotes integrated action to end all forms of violence in all settings, her country visits highlight the need for a strong focus on children at higher risk. She has, therefore, welcomed efforts to increase the use of alternatives to institutionalization for children in need of care and protection, including in Lithuania. During

²⁴ See <https://www.crsdsenegal.org/>.

her visit to Thailand, the Special Representative noted ongoing efforts in the country to advance alternatives to deprivation of liberty for children on the move, and to end statelessness. She welcomed measures by Andorra to ensure the social inclusion of children with disabilities as a key protective factor. The Special Representative consistently promotes the need to observe the highest child safeguarding standards across all sectors. In this regard, during her visit to Solomon Islands, the Special Representative welcomed the commitment of the Prime Minister to ensure child protection as a key dimension of the Pacific Games being hosted there in November 2023.

29. The Special Representative has emphasized the interlinkages between violence against women and violence against children during every visit, stressing the need to promote gender equality and empowerment. Another cross-cutting theme for the Special Representative during her visits is the need to promote the involvement of children in decision-making processes.

30. The Special Representative systematically ensures follow-up and continuing support to States that she has visited in previous years. During the Sustainable Development Goals Summit, she met with a high-level delegation from Chad to discuss the finalization of its first Children's Code, its first national integrated child protection policy and the associated results-oriented action plan, in follow-up to recommendations made during her visit to Chad in November 2021. The Special Representative has continued her engagement with and support to Lebanon since her country visits in 2021 and 2022, particularly with regard to law reform and child protection actions at the municipal level.

31. Building on a country visit to Greece in May 2022, the Office of the Special Representative continued to engage with the Government on the implementation of the National Emergency Response Mechanism for unaccompanied refugee children in precarious conditions, including through a technical mission to Greece. In line with the recommendations arising from the Special Representative's country visit to the Dominican Republic in October 2022, the Government has launched a strategic framework to strengthen its national child protection systems, as well as incorporating child protection into its national tourism plan, with the support of the United Nations country team. Côte d'Ivoire has defined the minimum package of services needed to ensure the full protection of children, particularly the most vulnerable groups, in line with a recommendation made by the Special Representative during her country visit in November 2022.

Regional engagement

32. The Special Representative has continued to strengthen collaboration with regional and subregional organizations, including through her participation in high-level advocacy opportunities, the provision of technical support and guidance, and the creation of connections between organizations in different regions. As well as emphasizing the interlinkages between achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and ending all forms of violence against children, she has advocated for action on a range of specific issues.

33. The Special Representative has, for example, promoted the need for investment in integrated, cross-sectoral services for children and families in her engagements with the Council of Europe. Building and strengthening child protection systems has been a central theme of her engagement with the European Union, including in the context of her participation in a high-level meeting in June 2023 dedicated to European Union support for the reconstruction and reform of the child protection system in Ukraine, the safe return of children and family reunification.

34. With regard to harmful traditional practices, including child marriage and female genital mutilation, the Special Representative continues to contribute to the African Union working group on ending harmful traditional practices, and contributed to the advocacy guide on ending child marriage and to the preparation of the International Conference on Female Genital Mutilation held in the United Republic of Tanzania in October 2023. She also contributed to the launch of the joint general comment of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on female genital mutilation. The need to tackle the drivers of and demand for child trafficking, and to tackle criminal trafficking networks, has been another important

dimension of her advocacy and support for regional and subregional organizations, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

35. The Special Representative has continued to promote the need to incorporate child rights and child protection into action to combat the climate crisis. She participated in a regional event on the impact of climate changes on child labour in the Arab region convened in December 2023 on the margins of the twenty-eighth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The event was held in cooperation with the League of Arab States, the Arab Labour Organization, the Arab Gulf Programme for Development and the Arab Council for Childhood and Development.

36. Amplifying the voices and involvement of children in regional processes and mechanisms has been a crucial dimension of the work of the Special Representative, as highlighted by her support for child participation platforms developed by the European Union and the African Union, as well as for the first Africa Children's Summit, held in April 2023. This child-led event, hosted by Kenya, facilitated dialogue between policymakers and children, and provided concrete recommendations for the African Union, the United Nations and African Governments.

37. The Special Representative focused on the urgent need to guarantee the protection of children in the digital environment in her intervention during the sixth Arab high-level ministerial conference on child rights, organized by the League of Arab States, in May 2023. She has also continued to contribute to the implementation and monitoring of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Plan of Action for the Protection of Children from All Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse. In addition, the Special Representative has continued to engage with ASEAN to define joint actions and contributions from her Office to the work of ASEAN on its forthcoming regional plan of action on violence against children and violence against women, child participation, and public financing and investment in children's protection and well-being.

38. The Special Representative has engaged with the UNICEF regional office and country offices in the Latin America and the Caribbean region to see how best to support in a cross-cutting manner concrete action by States to tackle violence against children.

National human rights institutions

39. National human rights institutions and children's rights ombudspersons are key components of national protection systems, in particular when they work in line with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles) and put in place adequate mechanisms to ensure that they are accessible to all children, regardless of their status. The Special Representative engages at the international, regional and national levels to support the harmonization of national legal frameworks with international human rights standards, ensure compliance with international legal obligations to safeguard human rights, and support engagement with children as actors of change. The Special Representative engaged with national human rights institutions in Copenhagen under the umbrella of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions on their role in protecting at-risk children and marginalized children from deprivation of liberty, torture and other ill-treatment. At the country level, engagement with national human rights institutions and with ombudspersons for children – including during country visits to Andorra, Fiji, Kenya, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Senegal and Thailand during the reporting period – provided opportunities for the Special Representative to provide technical support and to have exchanges on incorporating child rights into the work of national human rights institutions and on ensuring that complaints and investigatory mechanisms are fully accessible and child-friendly.

United Nations and international organizations

40. The Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children remains an important forum for information-sharing and joint initiatives with United Nations partners and with relevant mandates to end violence against children. The membership of the Working Group has been extended to include the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women).

41. The Special Representative has continued her close cooperation with the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Human Rights Council, the special procedures and the universal periodic review. She has, in particular, supported consideration of the relevant outcomes of the universal periodic review – particularly linkages with the recommendations accepted by States – in efforts to end violence against children and to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The establishment of an antenna office in Geneva will allow the Special Representative to further strengthen this engagement.

42. One key development has been the finalization of a United Nations system-wide guidance note on the mainstreaming of children's rights. This aims to make children's rights, including their meaningful participation, an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of United Nations policies and programmes and for the assessment of the implications for children of any action taken by the United Nations. The Office of the Special Representative will continue to provide support to this process through its active participation in the task team on child rights mainstreaming established under the Call to Action for Human Rights.

43. As Chair of the United Nations task force on children deprived of liberty, the Special Representative works closely with Member States, the NGO Panel on Children Deprived of Liberty, academia and other relevant stakeholders to promote a key message: that preventing and ending the deprivation of liberty of children is both urgent and possible. She continues to promote the adoption of child rights-based alternative solutions to deprivation of liberty. There has been significant progress on raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, ensuring child- and gender-sensitive justice, repatriation and reintegration, and the better use of technology and other innovations to ensure and increase children's access to justice.

44. As part of the implementation of the task force's joint pledge on ending child immigration detention submitted to the 2022 International Migration Review Forum, in 2023 the task force submitted a contribution to the United Nations Network on Migration workstream on the Global Compact for Migration indicators to support the inclusion of a core indicator to end child immigration detention. The task force has finalized an advocacy brief on examples of alternatives to children's immigration detention. In addition, the task force is developing a series of advocacy briefs to address other aspects of deprivation of liberty, including justice for children and deprivation of liberty, children in care institutions, and children deprived of liberty on grounds related to national security, terrorism or armed conflict. In this regard, the Special Representative has prioritized the release and repatriation of children detained in camps, such as those in Al-Hol and Al-Roj in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic and in Iraq. She was encouraged by the commitment and ongoing efforts for repatriations also from authorities and partners in Morocco and Indonesia respectively.

45. In line with the Special Representative's 2019 pledge, her Office engaged in the preparatory process for the second Global Refugee Forum, organized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) along with Colombia, France, Japan, Jordan, Niger, Switzerland and Uganda and held in December 2023. The Special Representative prioritized an integrated approach to securing comprehensive support and care for refugee children and ensuring the participation of children before, during and after the Forum. Her Office participated actively in workshops with Member States and consultations with children organized to inform the Forum. At the Forum, the Special Representative made a pledge and supported the multi-stakeholder child rights pledge.²⁵ She also facilitated the intergenerational dialogue as part of the Global Refugee Forum, involving refugee children from different States and civil society organizations.

46. The Special Representative co-chaired the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) in 2023 with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), integrating child protection as a cross-cutting theme in its engagement with global and regional partners, processes and platforms. ICAT consistently advocated for stronger safeguards and measures to protect child victims of trafficking, the implementation of the

²⁵ See <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/pledges-contributions/multistakeholder-pledges-2023/multistakeholder-pledge-child-rights>.

non-punishment principle, and access to justice informed by the perspectives of survivors and frontline actors, as well as stronger accountability mechanisms for child trafficking in humanitarian contexts. Efforts have also been made to address the existing gaps in child trafficking research and studies, by hosting several specialized webinars and events.

47. The ICAT Call to Action – endorsed by the heads of 31 member organizations – will raise awareness about the urgency of empowering and protecting all children and of undertaking 10 specific actions by 2025 to prevent and eliminate child trafficking globally.²⁶ Building on their productive co-chairing, and seeking to ensure continuity of the important workstreams initiated in 2023, the Special Representative and IOM will continue to co-chair ICAT in 2024, under the overall coordination of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

48. The Special Representative has continued 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. On 23 February 2023, she and the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict briefed the Security Council, under the presidency of Malta, stressing the need to incorporate child protection into efforts to prevent and end conflicts and to position it at the heart of the work of the Security Council. The Special Representative on Violence against Children and the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict have continued their coordination on situations requiring urgent attention, such as that in Israel and Gaza.²⁷ As the alarming situation for children has continued to deteriorate and the number of casualties increase, the Special Representative on Violence against Children has continued to reiterate the Secretary-General’s and General Assembly’s call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

49. The Special Representative and UNODC have launched a joint strategy and action plan on ending violence against children, with three main objectives: ensuring that children and their environments are better protected from violence; supporting children who experience crime and violence; and supporting children in contact with justice systems. The Special Representative participated in the thirty-second session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, in May 2023, highlighting the need to secure access to child-sensitive justice, to tackle violence online and to protect children on the move. She has also pursued strong collaboration with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) on the protection of children from online sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking and other crimes, as well as on the promotion and implementation of stronger safeguarding for child victims.

50. The Special Representative and the International Telecommunication Union continued their collaboration through the “protection through online participation” initiative, which is aimed at providing guidance on how to implement and improve child protection services functioning online. The initiative brought together 30 global partners, including United Nations agencies, academics, participants from the private sector, and civil society partners, to collect evidence and agree on suggested recommendations.²⁸ The group has collected data from 100 countries – from helplines, tech companies, online gaming spaces and social media platforms commonly used by children. The initial results reveal an increasing use of digital means for children to access safety and protection, and greater potential for intersectoral collaboration to identify effective strategies to address children’s requests for support around child protection through the Internet. As part of the “protection through online participation” initiative, information has been collected from social media platforms, search engines, content creator platforms and video streaming services, among others, on their perceptions of how children and youth use their platforms to access safety and protection – whether the threats or harms they are experiencing are online or offline. The results of this work will be published and disseminated in due course.

²⁶ See <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/Webstories2023/un-forum-calls-for-urgent-action-to-end-child-trafficking.html>.

²⁷ See <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/statement-srsg-vac-dr-najat-maalla-m%E2%80%99jid-and-srsg-caac-virginia-gamba-about-situation-israel>.

²⁸ See <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/content/pop>.

Civil society and faith-based organizations

51. The Special Representative works closely with civil society organizations through joint advocacy, research and information exchange. She has continued collaborations with organizations working to end violence against children based in New York and Geneva, as well as connecting with those working at the grass roots during her country visits, when they are invited to join the civil society partners that meet periodically with her. Capitalizing on the first fully in-person convening of the high-level political forum on sustainable development since the pandemic, the Special Representative hosted a gathering of civil society representatives in her office to catalyse further collaborations between and among partners.

52. The Special Representative works closely with religious leaders and faith-based organizations and communities – key constituencies in tackling violence and promoting positive social norms. She commended the efforts made by faith-based organizations during her country visits and has shared their experiences as promising practices, including those of the Adyan Foundation (Lebanon), the Cadre des Religieux and the Federation of Koranic Schools (Senegal), the Pacific Conference of Churches (Fiji), Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas (Morocco) and national Christian organizations (Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire). She also collaborates with a group of faith-based organizations and religious communities working together to commemorate the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children, convened by Arigatou International, which took place in India this year.

Increasing involvement of children

53. The Special Representative continues to engage systematically with children, to support and amplify their initiatives, and to act as a bridge-builder with decision makers. During 2023, she engaged with over 1,600 children through eight regional consultations ahead of the presentation of her annual reports to the Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly, as well as in national engagements during visits, where she aims for direct engagement with children who are marginalized and harder to reach.

54. The “protection through online participation” initiative outlined above has included in-depth interviews with children and young people who have suggested and implemented solutions to address the protection needs of their peers through digital means. The initiative will gather and highlight these innovative solutions, including, for example, an application called Ehtsab, created by a young girl, that shares real-time emergency information with residents of Kabul.

55. The Special Representative continues to issue child-friendly versions of the reports and materials produced by her Office, including her annual reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, as well as documents outlining technical information on violence against children, its root causes, effects and challenges. She also issues guidelines for United Nations entities to develop child-friendly versions of their reports, which have already been used to develop further resources for children on issues such as social protection and inclusion.

56. The Special Representative permanently amplifies children’s participation through a digital participation map, which provides over 300 examples of child-led or civil society-supported child participation actions. She will continue to map such initiatives and add them to the digital map, including examples of child participation in decision-making processes at the country level.

III. Protecting children on the move cannot wait

57. The world is facing a critical moment. An unprecedented number of children are on the move across all regions – whether as migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees or internally displaced persons – due to multifaceted and overlapping global crises. This displacement, coupled with a lack of protective measures, is placing children in extreme danger. In addition, it is placing huge pressure on Governments, communities and organizations working to ensure their protection. Yet, just as children’s rights most urgently need to be upheld and

their protection guaranteed, the responses to date are not equal to the task. Children on the move are not being treated as children first and foremost, with full protection for their rights. For these reasons, the Special Representative considers that it is essential to redouble global, regional and national action to ensure the protection of all children on the move.

A. Displacement and migration on an unprecedented scale

58. Children are on the move all over the world on an unprecedented scale. According to the *World Migration Report 2022* published by IOM, the estimated number of international migrants was 281 million, of whom an estimated 14.6 per cent were children.²⁹ UNHCR estimated that as at June 2023, 110 million people had been forcibly displaced around the world, of whom 43.3 million were children.³⁰ Between 2010 and 2022, the global number of forcibly displaced children more than doubled.³¹

59. Displacement is being driven by a diverse range of factors. Conflict and widespread violence remain key drivers, resulting in 25.8 million children being internally displaced at the end of 2022.³² Climate change is another significant factor: over the past six years, there have been 43 million internal displacements of children linked to weather-related disasters exacerbated by climate change – approximately equivalent to 20,000 children per day.³³ To these drivers can be added political instability, extreme poverty, structural inequality, food insecurity, and discrimination, among others. UNHCR indicated that the main drivers of forced displacement in the first half of 2023 were the conflicts in Ukraine, the Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Myanmar; a combination of drought, floods and insecurity in Somalia; and a prolonged humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.³⁴ In addition, at the time of writing of the present report, close to 1 million children had been forcibly displaced from their homes in the Gaza Strip, with UNICEF describing it as the most dangerous place in the world to be a child.³⁵ For many children, displacement is not temporary: it is becoming increasingly protracted. Most children displaced today will spend their entire childhood in displacement.³⁶

B. Unprecedented risks

60. At every stage of their journey, children are exposed to heightened risks of violence and harm. These threats are often interconnected and interrelated and can be magnified further for unaccompanied and separated children.

61. Migrating or being displaced, and coping with the lack of regular avenues for migration, can be fatal. Since 2018, UNICEF estimates that around 1,500 children have died or gone missing while attempting the central Mediterranean sea crossing. This number accounts for 1 in 5 of the 8,274 people who have died or gone missing on the route, making it the deadliest according to the records of the IOM Missing Migrant Project. UNICEF has highlighted the fact that the number of deaths and disappearances of children on the central Mediterranean route tripled in 2023 in comparison to 2022, with 11 children dying every week attempting to cross.³⁷ This is not confined to the Mediterranean basin: deaths and

²⁹ See <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/WMR-2022.pdf>.

³⁰ See <https://www.unhcr.org/us/mid-year-trends>.

³¹ See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/>.

³² Ibid.

³³ See <https://www.unicef.org/media/147931/file/The%20climate-changed%20child%20-%20Report%20in%20English.pdf>.

³⁴ See <https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/press-releases/unhcr-forced-displacement-continues-grow-conflicts-escalate>.

³⁵ See <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/statement-adele-khodr-unicef-regional-director-middle-east-and-north-africa-0>.

³⁶ See <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/number-displaced-children-reaches-new-high-433-million>.

³⁷ See <https://www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/number-unaccompanied-children-crossing-deadly-central-mediterranean-sea-migration> and <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/eleven-children-die-every-week-attempting-cross-central-mediterranean-sea-migration>.

disappearances of children on the move are a reality in all regions, with a small number of particularly dangerous routes often accounting for most cases.³⁸

62. Children on the move – especially those who are unaccompanied or separated – are at heightened risk of violence, including being trafficked. Child trafficking is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that continues to evolve, including with the development of technology-facilitated trafficking. Children account for 35 per cent of all identified victims of trafficking.³⁹ They are trafficked for a wide variety of purposes, including for sexual exploitation, forced marriage, forced labour, illegal adoption, begging, or recruitment for criminal or violent extremist groups. Restrictive migration policies perpetuate the smuggling of migrants and make it increasingly lucrative.⁴⁰

63. A higher risk of experiencing sexual or gender-based violence is another reality for children on the move.⁴¹ There is significant evidence demonstrating pervasive and chronic sexual and gender-based violence against girls and women, in particular on migration routes the world over, though such violence is also increasingly experienced by boys.⁴² It can occur at all stages of a migrating child’s journey; in addition to occurring in contexts of exploitation by traffickers, children may be forced into “survival sex” to gain passage, shelter, sustenance or money for onward journeys.⁴³ This is also an issue that has arisen in the Special Representative’s direct engagement with displaced girls and women in the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, who stressed that early marriage became a widespread coping mechanism intended to ensure girls’ safety and to address poverty.

64. Children on the move are also deprived of their liberty. Whether detained themselves or impacted by the detention of their parents or guardians, children are particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect in these contexts. At least 80 countries have laws and policies that allow children to be detained based on their legal or migratory status, and at least 330,000 children globally per year are deprived of their liberty based on their or their parents’ legal or migratory status.⁴⁴ Lack of accurate data means this is likely to be a significant underestimate. An estimated 52,000 people are reportedly detained in the Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, 80 per cent being children under 12 years of age.⁴⁵ While many countries have committed to end child immigration detention, the reality is that even in some countries where legislation does not support immigration detention, it continues to be used.⁴⁶ The Special Representative has consistently emphasized that children must never be separated from their families and detained on the basis of their migration status or that of their parents, in any setting, as this is never in their best interest. She emphasizes further that authorities must respect the non-refoulement principle, particularly in relation to children, and that national security concerns do not negate the obligation to be guided by the best interests of the child.

65. Displacement undermines the protection of children by disrupting their family and community support, increasing their poverty, and reducing their access to services essential for their protection and well-being. This is especially true for children who are stateless or living in camps and camp-like situations, which generally operate as parallel systems in host countries that are not connected to or integrated into national child protection systems. Families trapped in such situations sometimes resort to high-risk coping mechanisms, such as coercing children into early marriage or sending them into child labour. This leaves children at even greater risk of exploitation and school dropout, which perpetuate poverty

³⁸ See <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.

³⁹ See <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/protection/gender-based-violence>.

⁴² See <https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/181126-AloneUnsafe-Report-EN-web.pdf>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/united-nations-global-study-children-deprived-liberty> and [A/75/183](https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/united-nations-global-study-children-deprived-liberty).

⁴⁵ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/07/syria-un-expert-calls-end-mass-arbitrary-and-indefinite-detentions-and-urges>.

⁴⁶ See <https://www.unicef.org/documents/global-programme-framework-children-move>.

and make it more difficult to obtain a legal identity.⁴⁷ Children may also go missing or end up in street situations.

66. Children on the move are very often subject to severe trauma. This trauma affects the capacities of these children to provide accurate accounts of the long impact of the violence suffered, which is often not considered by the authorities in contact with them on their journeys. This can trigger mental health problems that can last into adulthood, while limiting their social and emotional development as well as their health and their educational potential. As one child interviewed as part of research undertaken by UNICEF Innocenti observed: “I will never forget what I have experienced in my journey, it was full of awful moments. I felt sad whenever the brokers mistreated us. I feel sad whenever I saw dead body of my fellow migrants. That memory still hurts me.”⁴⁸ The lack of adequate and specialized institutions that offer services and opportunities for such children can lead to hopelessness and exacerbate their mental health issues. It is critical to keep hope alive. In the words of another refugee child from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela:⁴⁹ “My dream is to come back to Venezuela and see my family. I hope the global leaders consider our dreams.”⁵⁰

C. Responses to date: fragmented and insufficient

67. While important steps to ensure the protection of children on the move around the world have been taken by States, the United Nations, civil society and other stakeholders, measures to date are not sufficient and or at the scale needed at this critical juncture.

68. Past and ongoing efforts to address these urgent as well as chronic situations are laudable, yet we are observing increasingly differential treatment of children facing similar protection risks. The gradual global erosion of a shared obligation to protect all children, regardless of their status, everywhere and in all circumstances, requires prompt action in order to be reversed.

69. Alarming, across many humanitarian settings now, there is a blatant disregard for the protection of civilians and children’s rights. Humanitarian and protections systems are under pressure as they try to scale up their response, and ensure it is appropriate and effective in addressing the diverse protection challenges facing children who have been forcibly displaced.

70. Many children on the move remain invisible to national child protection systems, and the access to information for them is fragmented or simply neglected. They are often caught in a bureaucratic net of lengthy processes to determine their status, and this curtails their opportunities for a better future. Identification systems to register children are often inadequate, making it difficult to meet the needs of children on the move. In particular, prompt identification of children travelling alone as unaccompanied or separated from their families, and their effective protection, remains an important challenge. Age assessment procedures are often not comprehensive and protective, and do not provide the benefit of the doubt from the outset, resulting in gaps in the effective protection of these children. Procedures, systems and practices for asylum and access to international protection are often confusing and lengthy, with delays leaving many children in standby situations for long periods. In addition, children turning 18 will also lack protection because they are no longer considered to be children, even though they continue to need special protective measures.

71. Too often, children suffer from a lack of access to essential services on the basis of their legal status, location or other factors. The barriers may be legal, political or administrative, as well as cultural/linguistic and financial. Children and their families often

⁴⁷ See https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/advocacy_brief_protection_of_children_on_the_move_in_times_of_crisis.pdf.

⁴⁸ Quotes from UNICEF Innocenti, “Rights denied: the voices and lived experiences of migrant and displaced children” (forthcoming publication), interviewee No. 22, male returnee, 18 years old, Ethiopia, 2019.

⁴⁹ Refugee girl, aged 11, from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in Peru.

⁵⁰ Initiative for Child Rights in the Global Compacts, “Our call for answers: children’s manifesto to the Global Refugee Forum 2023, in their own words”.

lack information or support in overcoming these barriers. Discrimination and xenophobia can be compounding factors and were highlighted by children whom the Special Representative met in many countries. For example, during the Special Representative's visit to an informal settlement in Saida, Lebanon, in 2021, difficulties were shared regarding access to education and medical care; the challenge posed by children's births not being registered; children working from an early age; and the violence experienced by children and its huge impact on their mental health throughout their lives, including in the settlement.

72. Collaboration between domestic child protection actors is often inadequate and fragmented – often due to limited resources and overstretched capacities – which weakens the protection on offer. Cooperation between national authorities in addressing migration within and across regions also presents significant challenges. During several onsite visits across all regions, the Special Representative identified varying levels of vulnerabilities of national and cross-border systems of identification, referral and protection, as well as the challenges of coordination, between immigration and border control authorities on the one hand, and child protection services on the other, within and between countries.

73. Most of today's displaced populations, including children, have been displaced for far too long in camps or settings that were set up to address short-term and urgent needs. Some have lived in such settings for generations. There is a need to reassess the way in which responses to crisis are provided, moving beyond the initial emergency phases – where the focus is on life-saving protection and assistance – to forward-looking efforts that identify from the outset durable solutions that are viable.

D. Children on the move are children first and foremost

74. Protection of children is possible and realizable, however it requires concrete and coordinated actions, including investing in a sustainable and integrated chain of services that are clearly identified and accessible to all children. The status of children on the move as children first – with all the protections to which they are entitled – should prevail over their migratory status. They must have access to child-friendly, integrated services that are led by the child and social protection sectors, rather than by authorities responsible for immigration and security procedures or border control.

75. There is a sound foundation of standards, guidance and examples of good practices on which to build. Drawing on this, an advocacy brief published by the Special Representative and other United Nations entities outlined the overarching framework for an effective response to the protection challenges faced by children on the move. This includes the importance of strengthening States' preparedness and response in the face of crises to enable them to fully protect and respect children's rights from the outset. Adequate mitigation measures need to be in place to ensure that all children and all their rights are fully protected, regardless of their origin, status and identity. In this connection, it is crucial to identify and respond to the acutely increased risks facing children in times of crisis. In addition, it is necessary to invest, as a matter of urgency, in the inclusion of displaced children in national systems and to move beyond emergency parallel responses, given the often protracted nature of displacement in many situations.

76. It is important to prioritize prevention and action on the underlying drivers of forced displacement and unsafe migration for children and their families by tackling violence, conflicts, climate change, discrimination, violence and poverty in countries of origin. More generally, investment in national child protection systems that include displaced children, rather than excluding them or creating separate services for them, has proven to be more sustainable and effective in the long term, from both economic and child rights perspectives. Parallel systems do not work. An integrated approach reinforces countries' preparedness in an environment where forced displacement and migration are likely to continue because of conflict, violence, persecution, disasters and climate change.

77. Access to civil documentation and birth registration are often essential prerequisites to accessing social services. There have been important efforts by States to support children on the move in this regard, for instance in Ethiopia where revisions were made to extend the scope of eligibility of registration services to include refugees and other non-nationals living

in the country.⁵¹ Around 1.6 million Venezuelans have received a temporary protection permit in Colombia out of the 2.5 million who have registered. A registration campaign was put in place in schools, which allowed 174,500 children to move forward in the process for receiving this identity card.⁵² Action to tackle statelessness is also needed. Rwanda, for example, has included protections against statelessness in its nationality code, especially for children born in the territory who cannot claim another nationality. It recognizes a child's right to acquire nationality on the basis of birth and residence in the country until the age of majority.⁵³ The Special Representative was particularly encouraged during her visit to Thailand by the pledge from the authorities to withdraw the country's reservation to article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which pertains to the protection of refugee and asylum-seeking children, as well as by the country's engagement and pledged commitment to bolster action to resolve and reduce statelessness, including through the development of a national action plan.

78. All children need non-discriminatory access to integrated and accessible services adapted to their needs, including social welfare, justice, health, education, and child and social protection. A number of submissions from States highlighted steps taken to ensure access to education services, including from Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia.⁵⁴ In Türkiye, a partnership framework was developed between municipalities and partners to enhance the delivery of community-based services for vulnerable children in the country through a network of safe spaces, community centres, outreach services and mobile teams.⁵⁵ With regard to provisions on alternative care for children and on prioritizing the use of family or community-based care over institutional care, Indonesia can be observed as applying a promising practice, where the law provides that refugee children – among others – whose parents are unable to care for them and children who need special protection may be provided with care through guardianship or fostering.⁵⁶ An inclusive and human rights-based approach that guarantees the availability and accessibility of integrated services for all children on the move can contribute to positive social, economic and cultural outcomes for these children and their families, communities and societies.

79. Mechanisms of early detection, referral and care, for example of unaccompanied children, are indeed essential, and help to identify those in the most vulnerable situations. A number of important, positive developments have occurred, for example in Greece with the establishment of the National Emergency Response Mechanism and the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors, while in Spain, the Ombudsman (*Defensor del Pueblo*) played a key role, stressing the urgency of addressing the protection gaps faced by unaccompanied children. When mechanisms are set up quickly and are well coordinated, the chances to ensure early identification and better responses are higher, as the Special Representative observed during her visit to Romania. Robust case-management systems are also needed, along with a well trained, equipped and supervised social workforce, as well as clear and dedicated standard operating procedures that define the roles and responsibilities of all actors. Well-designed information management systems can contribute to family tracing and reunification, as well as the timely identification of missing children.

⁵¹ See <https://www.unicef.org/media/83566/file/Good-practices-that-bring-the-Global-Refugee-Compact-to-Life.pdf>.

⁵² See <https://www.unicef.org/media/135631/file/Colombia-2022-COAR.pdf>.

⁵³ See <https://www.unhcr.org/rw/15761-ending-statelessness-in-2024-rwanda-establishes-a-clear-pathway-toward-this-goal.html>.

⁵⁴ Lithuania indicated that it supported refugees and asylum-seekers so that they could have access to education, language classes, vocational training and employment (contribution from Lithuania, December 2023). Poland indicated that it provided education in public schools for all Ukrainian children under the same conditions as Polish citizens (contribution from Poland, December 2023). Slovenia indicated that it provided access to education, health services, accommodation and care for all children, regardless of their status (contribution from Slovenia, December 2023).

⁵⁵ See <https://www.unicef.org/media/83566/file/Good-practices-that-bring-the-Global-Refugee-Compact-to-Life.pdf>.

⁵⁶ See https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/13461/file/ASEAN_CABM_UNICEF_Migration_SitAn_Main_report.pdf.

80. Strengthening the role of the justice system in preventing and responding to violence against children is essential and a prerequisite for the upholding of child rights and the granting of access to justice for children, as well as for ending impunity and ensuring accountability for violations of child rights. In addition, it is critical to ensure full compliance with international human rights law by prohibiting child immigration detention. Many States are taking action to end this practice.⁵⁷

81. Domestic and cross-border coordination is vital among relevant authorities – especially those responsible for child protection and well-being. Entities at the national and subnational levels – including, critically, police and security services – alongside civil society actors, international agencies and concerned Governments, must protect displaced children from all forms of violence. This requires support for the establishment and development of strong national protection systems, and appropriate coordination mechanisms within countries and across borders where relevant.

82. Regional collaboration across multiple countries affected by the same crisis is also essential in order to harmonize responses. An example of action at the subregional level is the ECOWAS strategic framework to strengthen national child protection systems and the establishment of the West Africa Network, which ensures that a continuum of services are delivered across the region as part of an eight-step procedure, ranging from identification of a vulnerable child to provision of emergency care to successful return and social reintegration.⁵⁸ Another example was the event held in July 2023 entitled “Regional exchange on the implementation of stage zero of the route for comprehensive protection of the rights of migrant boys, girls and adolescents”, at which representatives of child protection institutions from Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico and Panama shared experiences, including challenges and opportunities, and stressed the critical importance of interinstitutional cooperation across the region.⁵⁹ The European Union’s Temporary Protection Directive enables member States to move rapidly to offer protection and rights to people in need of immediate protection and to avoid overwhelming national asylum systems in cases of mass arrivals of displaced persons in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine. Although the Special Representative expressed concern that the standards of protection were not being applied to all international protection applicants equally, the responses and solidarity expressed have raised hopes for concrete progress on the overdue reform of the European Union’s migration and asylum procedures.

83. It is essential to engage children and young people on the move, safely and ethically, as key actors and partners in shaping the response. This means empowering them, listening to them and learning from them. In addition, children and young people on the move need to be involved in policy processes at global, national and local levels, with specific efforts to engage the children who are the most vulnerable and excluded. For example, the Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society, in partnership with the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade of Malta and with the support of the Special Representative on Violence Against Children and the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, is undertaking a collection of the voices of children coming from and through different conflict zones to Malta, analysing their access to protection services and their views on areas that need improvement. The second Global Refugee Forum provided a further example. Child refugees from 11 countries across the world submitted their calls to global leaders, adding to the refugee children participating in person in the Forum, seeking to ensure that decisions were duly informed by the views and experiences of children, a process to which the Office of the Special Representative contributed.

84. Research conducted by UNICEF Innocenti, with migrant and displaced children and adolescents aged 14 to 18 in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan, provided an important perspective on children’s experiences and views of their migration journeys,

⁵⁷ United Nations task force on children deprived of liberty, advocacy brief on ending child immigration detention (forthcoming).

⁵⁸ See <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/African-Action-Agenda-for-Children-Uprooted.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Contribution from Mexico, December 2023.

displacement and return.⁶⁰ The children interviewed showed a strong sense of agency in relation to their lives and the reasons for their migration. They first and foremost wanted to be able to support their families and ensure decent living conditions for themselves and their relatives. “I would like to be a very educated man in the future, who is able to support his family, and become a valuable member of community. But to become that person, I need support in terms of education.”⁶¹

85. Children on the move with whom the Special Representative has met all over the world and during the intergenerational dialogue as part of the Global Refugee Forum have all been consistent in their concerns and requests for their safety and the protection of all their rights, as highlighted in the following manner by two refugee girls from the Syrian Arab Republic. One said: “As a 6-year-old, I prepared myself to be sent back to the war zone. I used to have nightmares, and fear for my life. How could adults tell me that I don’t deserve safety when I had no choice but to leave. You all need to gain my trust again and the trust of all children by implementing the policies and not using them just for show.” The other girl said: “We children are often overlooked, our contributions and views are not taken seriously. We need to be included in decisions that affect our lives.”

IV. The way forward

86. Millions and millions of children are left behind. The world is facing an unprecedented child rights crisis. Violence against children in all its forms and in all settings continues to increase worldwide. Armed conflicts, the climate crisis and environmental degradation, food insecurity, poverty and social disparities have reached such levels that we are witnessing an unprecedented level of displacement of children. Protecting the rights of children on the move in times of crisis is needed more than ever. Investing in integrated child protection systems that are accessible to all children, including children on the move, is essential for the full respect and protection of all children’s rights, at all times. Protecting the rights of children on the move also means involving and empowering them more and more, by providing them with safe pathways to receive information, to express themselves freely and to participate in decision-making processes.

87. Against the background of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the second Global Refugee Forum and the high-level pledges made there, the way forward is to ensure their observance and implementation without further delays, as the children attending these events called for. The upcoming United Nations Summit of the Future, in September 2024, is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance cooperation on critical challenges and address gaps in global governance, reaffirming existing commitments, including to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Charter of the United Nations, and to move towards a reinvigorated multilateral system that is better positioned to positively impact people’s lives, including for all children. The action-oriented Pact for the Future, expected to be endorsed by Heads of State and Government at the Summit, showcasing global solidarity for current and future generations, must place the situation of all children, including the millions forcibly displaced, at its core.

88. The year 2024 marks the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, an opportunity to revamp and revitalize efforts to end violence against all children. Despite important strides made, the recommendations included in the Secretary-General’s study on violence against children⁶² – which was the origin of the mandate of the Special Representative – are still extremely relevant and pertinent.

⁶⁰ Quotes from UNICEF Innocenti, “Rights denied: the voices and lived experiences of migrant and displaced children” (forthcoming publication).

⁶¹ Ibid., interviewee No. 37, male Somali internally displaced person, 16 years old, Somalia, 2019.

⁶² [A/61/299](#).

89. Fewer than six years remain to honour the promise made to end all forms of violence against all children in all settings by 2030. The question to be asked is therefore: is it a vain promise or is it still achievable? We owe it to all children to keep the promise. It is possible if we move from reiterating commitments and pledges to concrete, integrated and sustainable actions for and with children, leaving no one behind.
