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Promotion and protection of the rights of children

Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [74/133](#) and includes information on the implementation of the priority themes of the resolutions on the rights of the child that were adopted by the General Assembly at its sixty-ninth to seventy-third sessions. It also includes a review of the advancements and remaining challenges relating to international and national efforts towards protecting children from discrimination and overcoming inequalities, as well as information on the right to education, migrant and displaced children and ending violence against children.

* [A/76/150](#).

** The present report was submitted after the deadline so as to include the most recent information.



I. Introduction

1. In its resolution [74/133](#), the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its seventy-sixth session a comprehensive report on the rights of the child containing information on the status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with a focus on child rights and the Sustainable Development Goals. The present report is submitted in accordance with that request.

2. In the present report, specific attention is paid to children who are left furthest behind or are at risk thereof. Focus is placed on the Sustainable Development Goal implementation gaps and barriers affecting the realization of child rights and on efforts made to ensure that a child rights approach is central to the implementation of the Goals.

II. Status of and reporting on the Convention on the Rights of the Child

3. As at 1 July 2021, all States Members of the United Nations, with the exception of the United States of America, had ratified or acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 171 States had ratified or acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the involvement of children in armed conflict, 177 States had ratified or acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and 48 States had ratified or acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on a communications procedure.

4. The Committee on the Rights of the Child held its eighty-fifth to eighty-seventh sessions online owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. As at 1 July 2021, the Committee had received all initial reports from States parties and reviewed all but two. The Committee had also received 589 reports pursuant to article 44 of the Convention, 121 initial reports and 2 periodic reports under the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict and 121 initial reports and 2 periodic reports under the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

III. Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals

A. Mutual reinforcement and complementarity

5. By design, human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are inextricably linked. While a number of the Goals appear to apply to children explicitly, the Goals and targets have an impact on child rights.¹

6. A child rights approach is critical to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its pledge to leave no one behind, including children affected by armed conflict and disaster, children with disabilities, children in alternative care, children living in poverty, children in street situations, young children, girls, pregnant adolescents, adolescent caregivers, refugee and migrant children, children whose parents have migrated, internally displaced children, stateless children, indigenous children, minority children, children living in slums and informal settlements, children living in rural and hard-to-reach areas, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other (LGBTIQ+) children, children affected by HIV, child labourers, children

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Mapping the Global Goals for Sustainable Development and the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (New York, 2016).

affected by violence, children affected by economic upheaval and climate change, children deprived of their liberty, including in the justice system, children facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and children in other disadvantaged situations, many of which have been further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

B. Realizing children’s rights in the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals: current challenges

Civil and political rights

7. In 2020, children continued, as human rights holders, claimants and defenders, to exercise their civil and political rights, including the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, the right to freedom of expression and the right to be heard demanding, inter alia, social justice and climate action.² They faced interference in the exercise of these rights owing to shrinking civic space, inflexible social norms and values, legal barriers and adult-centred policies and programmes. They also faced significant risks to their safety and even to their lives. For example, indigenous peoples, including children, standing for the promotion and protection of their rights were increasingly targeted.³

8. Millions of children, many of whom were not able to seek redress and/or obtain an effective remedy, continued to have their rights violated every day. Many of the obstacles that children faced in gaining access to justice were either specific to children or greater for children, who often depend on adults to obtain information and navigate complex administrative and judicial systems. Procedures were generally not adapted to children, legal aid was insufficient, support services were rare and social norms often made it difficult for children to seek redress.⁴

No poverty and reduced inequalities

9. A major challenge in the realization of the rights of all children and achievement of the 2030 Agenda was rising levels of child poverty and worsening structural inequalities, affecting in particular children who were the most discriminated against and marginalized. Significant progress that had been made towards addressing monetary and multidimensional poverty slowed and was in some contexts reversed by the compounding impacts of conflict and displacement, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

10. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of children living in multidimensional poverty was estimated to have risen to 1.2 billion, marking an increase of 150 million children.⁵ Before the pandemic, the children most likely to experience extreme poverty had been the youngest and those in low-income countries, in rural areas and from female-headed households. COVID-19 worsened the situation, in particular for children already living in poverty, mostly in rural areas and in contexts affected by conflict, fragility and displacement; children who had recently emerged from poverty; and children who had not previously experienced poverty, mostly in urban areas and from families working in the service and informal sectors.⁶

² Child Rights Connect, *The Rights of Child Human Rights Defenders: Implementation Guide* (Geneva, 2020).

³ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, “Building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future with indigenous peoples: a call to action” (n.p., 2020).

⁴ UNICEF, *Children’s Equitable Access to Justice: Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (New York, 2015).

⁵ See <https://data.unicef.org/resources/impact-of-covid-19-on-multidimensional-child-poverty/>.

⁶ See <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/767501596721696943-0090022020/original/ProfilesofthenewpoorduetotheCOVID19pandemic.pdf>.

Child deprivations were further compounded by the exacerbation of the global childcare crisis caused by COVID-19,⁷ the disproportionate role of women in the informal and unpaid work sector and the projected decline in global remittances.

11. More than 200 countries expanded their social protection coverage with expenditure of about \$750 billion, highlighting the ability of strong national programmes across diverse contexts to respond quickly to socioeconomic shocks, such as through support to school feeding programmes. However, poverty and inequalities also continued to be affected by the policy and financing choices of governments that did not sufficiently prioritize social investments, address structural inequalities, exclusion or discrimination or enable multisectoral coordination.⁸

12. Children living in humanitarian contexts, including those affected by climate, conflict and displacement, were particularly at risk of extreme poverty. Approximately 42 per cent of children who lived in fragile and conflict-affected countries lived in extreme poverty, compared with 15 per cent of children in other countries.⁹

13. Indigenous children, as well as children belonging to minorities, including children of African descent, continued to face barriers to their rights, including marginalization, racism and structural discrimination, compounded by intersecting vulnerabilities, including for girls, LGBTIQ+ children, children with disabilities and children in conflict-affected areas, remote or nomadic settlements or urban settings. The COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities, who experienced an increase in discrimination and violence, along with denial of services and exposure to stigma and hate speech.¹⁰

14. In 2020, children represented nearly 13 per cent of all migrants worldwide.¹¹ Nearly 1.5 million asylum-seeking children, approximately 12.6 million child refugees and 19.4 million children had been forcibly displaced within their own countries by violence and conflict.¹² Many of the children were born undocumented because they or their parents lacked legal status, resulting in serious protection challenges and barriers to gaining access to basic services. Although there is no global figure for the total number of unaccompanied and separated children on the move, available data show that the majority are concentrated on specific migration routes.¹³

15. While the Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to each child within the jurisdictions of States parties, children on the move often faced discrimination in gaining access to national child protection services and education, health and social protection systems. This was further compounded by the discrimination and xenophobia that children experienced at the hands of public authorities, service providers, teachers, doctors, neighbours and peers. Children on the move who faced multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as those based on gender identity, race, disability or sexual orientation, encountered particularly high protection risks, in particular when they lacked legal status and documentation. While

⁷ See www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1109-childcare-in-a-global-crisis-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-work-and-family-life.html.

⁸ See <https://devinit.org/resources/adapting-aid-to-end-poverty/covid-19-and-its-impact-financing-landscape/>.

⁹ See <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/966791603123453576/pdf/Global-Estimate-of-Children-in-Monetary-Poverty-An-Update.pdf>.

¹⁰ See www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Minorities/OHCHRGuidance_COVID19_MinoritiesRights.pdf.

¹¹ See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/migration/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ UNICEF, *A child is a child: Protecting children on the move from violence, abuse and exploitation* (New York, 2017).

immigration detention of children is never in a child's best interest, it continued to be applied in many countries.¹⁴

16. In 2020, half the world's children lived in urban areas, a number projected to reach nearly 70 per cent by mid-century, with close to 90 per cent of the increase occurring in Africa and Asia.¹⁵ An estimated 350 million children lived in slums, where they had limited access to housing, basic infrastructure and high-quality essential services, such as health care, education and adequate sanitation. Owing to limited access to life-saving handwashing facilities, as well as to overcrowding, COVID-19 mitigation measures, such as social distancing and self-isolation, were difficult to follow.¹⁶

17. In many contexts, the rights of children with disabilities were not considered in policy planning, national information systems and service delivery, a situation further compounded by COVID-19. For example, in 2020, half the children with disabilities globally were not enrolled in schools, and children with disabilities remained disproportionately represented in institutional care.¹⁷

Good health and well-being

18. Notwithstanding progress made, a significant percentage of the world's child population lacked access to basic and affordable health services. Infectious diseases, including pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria, remained a leading cause of death in children under 5 years of age, along with pre-term birth and intrapartum-related complications. In countries classified as fragile, the mortality rate in children under 5 years of age was nearly three times higher than the rate in non-fragile countries.¹⁸ Global immunization data from 2019 showed that there were nearly 14 million "zero-dose" children (those who had never received any vaccine), while 6 million children received only some of the vaccines required for full protection against vaccine-preventable diseases. The low rate of immunization was a result of multiple factors, including long-standing social, economic and health inequalities and weak health systems.

19. An estimated 21 million girls 15 to 19 years of age in lower- and middle-income countries became pregnant, and some 12 million of them gave birth.¹⁹ Complications during pregnancy and childbirth were the leading cause of death in girls 15 to 19 years of age globally.²⁰ An estimated 1.2 million children, predominantly those living in poorer areas, died in 2020 from treatable non-communicable diseases.²¹ An estimated 10 per cent to 20 per cent of adolescents experienced mental health issues.²²

20. While children are at relatively low risk of mortality and severe morbidity from COVID-19, the indirect effects of the virus, stemming from strained health systems, disruptions to life-saving health services and malnutrition, had a significant impact on child survival and well-being. Routine immunization services were substantially hindered in at least 68 countries, potentially affecting 80 million children under 1 year

¹⁴ UNICEF, "Alternatives to immigration detention of children", working paper (New York, 2019).

¹⁵ See [E/ICEF/2021/3](#).

¹⁶ United Nations Human Settlements Programme and UNICEF, "Water, sanitation and hygiene for COVID-19 response in slums and informal urban settlements", interim technical note (Geneva and New York, 2020).

¹⁷ UNICEF, *Global Annual Results Report 2020: Goal Area 5* (New York, June 2021).

¹⁸ Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, *Levels and Trends in Child Mortality: Report 2020* (New York, UNICEF, 2020).

¹⁹ See www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See www.unicef.org/media/61436/file.

²² See https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-health/mental-health/#_edn1.

of age.²³ The pandemic resulted in significant reductions in the delivery of essential maternal, newborn and child health services, immunization, HIV/AIDS services, sexual and reproductive health services and disability and assistive technology services. The reductions affected in particular those who were the most disadvantaged and marginalized, including adolescents with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ adolescents, and placed women and girls at risk of unintended pregnancy and other health risks.²⁴

Nutrition

21. In 2020, it was estimated that 22 per cent of children under 5 years of age were stunted²⁵ and that 45.4 million children under 5 years of age suffered from wasting, nearly one third of them severely. Most of the children lived in lower-income and lower-middle-income countries.²⁶

22. Deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals continued to result in profound consequences for children's survival, growth and development and were associated with significantly increased risks of mortality, morbidity, blindness, hearing impairment, anaemia, poor linear growth and cognitive development and suboptimal learning and school performance. In early childhood, stark disparities were recorded in the prevalence of minimum dietary diversity by socioeconomic status, indicating that poverty was a barrier to gaining access to diverse and nutrient-dense foods. Owing to social and cultural norms, girls often lacked access to nutritious food and services and diet quality among pregnant and breastfeeding women was often insufficient to meet required nutritional needs.²⁷

23. The absence of exclusive breastfeeding in newborns contributed to malnutrition and predisposed certain children to obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases. Children in cities were more likely to live in "food deserts", where food options that supported children's healthy growth and development were often scarce and where nutrient-poor, high-calorie and ultra-processed foods were readily accessible and affordable.²⁸ The targeted marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, including in schools, a lack of physical activity, increasing poverty and socioeconomic inequalities and the increasing cost of healthy diets further exacerbated child malnutrition, affecting both the urban and rural poor. In 2020, estimates indicated that 39 million children under 5 years of age were overweight, an increase of approximately 17 per cent in two decades, with a large majority living in middle-income countries.²⁹ Overweight children were at increased risk of obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases later in life and of behavioural and emotional problems, including stigma and mental health issues.

24. The climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, water scarcity, large-scale industrial food production, environmental degradation and the increasing number, duration and complexity of climate-related disasters, health epidemics and humanitarian crises also threatened global health and nutrition security, affecting food quantity and access, dietary diversity and nutritional content. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated maternal and child malnutrition owing to poor access to nutritional diets, essential

²³ See <https://data.unicef.org/resources/immunization-coverage-are-we-losing-ground/>.

²⁴ See www.unfpa.org/news/studies-show-severe-toll-covid-19-sexual-and-reproductive-health-rights-around-world.

²⁵ UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO) and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, "Levels and trends in child malnutrition: key findings of the 2021 edition of the joint child malnutrition estimates" (Geneva, WHO, 2021).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ UNICEF, *Global Annual Results Report 2020: Goal Area 1* (New York, June 2021).

²⁸ See <https://features.unicef.org/state-of-the-worlds-children-2019-nutrition/>.

²⁹ UNICEF, WHO and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, "Levels and trends in child malnutrition".

nutrition services and adequate feeding and dietary practices, overwhelming pressure on health-care systems and the socioeconomic shocks resulting from increased unemployment and poverty.³⁰

High-quality education

25. In 2020, 71 per cent of children aged 36 months to 59 months of age were developmentally on track in at least three of the following key domains of development: literacy-numeracy, physical, learning and social-emotional skills,³¹ which indicates that, without a change in trajectory, target 4.2 of the Goals will not be achieved. In 2020, more than 40 per cent of children below primary school age needed childcare, but were unable to obtain access to it.³² The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated a pre-existing crisis in care and learning by causing a large-scale interruption of early childhood services, including childcare, primary health care, preschool education and family visits.

26. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 258 million children were not attending primary or secondary school.³³ In addition, approximately 6 out of 10 primary school-aged children and lower secondary school-aged adolescents were not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics, a particularly acute challenge in Central and Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.³⁴ While nearly all countries had legal guarantees to provide at least nine years of free primary and secondary education, measures for effective implementation were lacking.³⁵

27. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the largest global mass disruption to education systems in history, forcing school closures in more than 190 countries and affecting 90 per cent of the world's students at its peak in 2020. An estimated 370 million children missed out on free or subsidized school meals, which was particularly damaging to children already living in poverty, and an estimated 7.6 million girls were at risk of not returning to school.³⁶ National Governments around the world were quick to implement remote learning, new health protocols and reopening plans, but the policies varied widely on the basis of each country's wealth.³⁷

28. Inequalities in gaining access to high-quality education were exacerbated, with children who faced multiple forms of discrimination falling the furthest behind. Analysis of data from 100 countries suggested that more than 90 per cent of Governments enacted policies to provide digital or broadcast learning, but that at least 31 per cent of schoolchildren could not be reached by remote learning programmes, mainly owing to a lack of necessary household assets, connectivity or policies geared specifically towards their needs. In all, 70 per cent of students not reached lived in

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ UNICEF, *Data Companion and Scorecard to the Annual Report for 2020 of the Executive Director of UNICEF* (New York, 2021).

³² Amanda E. Devercelli and Frances Beaton-Day, *Better Jobs and Brighter Futures: Investing in Childcare to Build Human Capital* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2020).

³³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, "New methodology shows that 258 million children, adolescents and youth are out of school", fact sheet, No. 56 (Montreal, Canada, 2019).

³⁴ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "More than one-half of children and adolescents are not learning worldwide", fact sheet, No. 46 (Montreal, Canada, 2017).

³⁵ See <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>.

³⁶ Save Our Future, *Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children*, white paper (n.p., 2020).

³⁷ UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, "What have we learnt? Overview of findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to COVID-19" (Paris, New York and Washington, D.C., 2020).

rural areas, and more than three quarters of them came from the poorest households.³⁸ Given limited access to the Internet in low- and lower-middle-income countries, the pandemic risked exacerbating the learning crisis by further increasing inequalities between and within countries.³⁹ Inaccessible online learning as well as the lack of affordability of digital devices and the Internet, compounded by existing barriers, led to dropping out and learning losses for children with disabilities.⁴⁰ Although in previous years some countries had built bilingual intercultural education models, the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures disproportionately affected indigenous, minority, refugee and migrant children, with distance education offered mostly in the predominant language or not culturally appropriate.⁴¹ The 127 million school-age children affected by armed conflict, forced displacement and other humanitarian crises continued to face acute risks to their education.

Clean water and sanitation

29. The world is off track to achieve the 2030 targets regarding access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services and infrastructure, affecting all children's rights and disproportionately affecting children from the most marginalized and vulnerable communities.

30. In 2020, 1 out of 4 people, approximately one third of them children, did not have access to safely managed drinking water services, and 1 in 10 people lacked even basic drinking water services. Nearly half the population lacked safely managed sanitation services, and 1 out of 5 people did not have even basic sanitation services. In all, 3 out of 10 people lacked basic handwashing facilities with soap and water at home.⁴² In 2019, 31 per cent of schools lacked basic drinking water services, affecting 584 million children. A total of 37 per cent of schools lacked basic sanitation services, affecting 698 million children, and 43 per cent of schools did not have basic hygiene services, affecting 818 million children.⁴³

31. In 46 least developed countries, half of health-care facilities lacked basic water services, three out of five lacked basic sanitation services and a quarter of facilities lacked hand hygiene at points of care, posing grave challenges to maternal and child health.⁴⁴ Urban drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services struggled to keep up with increased demands owing to population growth, urbanization and rural-urban migration trends, including in relation to sanitation systems and waste management.⁴⁵ An estimated 110 million people with disabilities did not have access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services globally.⁴⁶ Poor adolescent girls continued to be the most negatively affected by inadequate drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services, including non-gender-segregated facilities and lack of access to menstrual

³⁸ UNICEF, "COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures?", fact sheet (New York, 2020).

³⁹ UNICEF and International Telecommunication Union, "How many children and young people have Internet access at home? Estimating digital connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic" (New York, 2020).

⁴⁰ See <https://inclusion-international.org/a-global-agenda-post-covid/>.

⁴¹ See www.unicef.org/lac/media/14566/file/UNICEF%20Call%20to%20Action.pdf.

⁴² UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2000–2020: Five Years into the Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva, 2021).

⁴³ UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools: Special focus on COVID-19* (New York, 2020).

⁴⁴ WHO, *Global Progress Report on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Health Care Facilities: Fundamentals First* (Geneva, 2020).

⁴⁵ UNICEF, *Advantage or Paradox? The Challenge for Children and Young People Growing Up Urban* (New York, 2018).

⁴⁶ UNICEF, "The case for investment in accessible and inclusive WASH", WASH technical paper, No. WASH/TP/04/2018 (New York, 2018).

hygiene and sanitary materials,⁴⁷ as well as by being responsible for water collection, which constitutes a significant physical burden and a potential protection risk. Compared with children in non-fragile contexts, those in fragile contexts were five times as likely to lack basic drinking water and four times as likely to lack basic sanitation, while open defecation rates were three times higher in fragile contexts.⁴⁸ In fragile countries, children under 5 years of age were 20 times more likely to die of diarrhoeal diseases than to violence.⁴⁹

32. While international law expressly prohibits military attacks against essential civilian infrastructure, such as water and sanitation installations, personnel and supplies and irrigation works, such violations and abuse continued, having a grave impact on children in conflict situations.⁵⁰

33. Without access to adequate drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services and learned healthy behaviours, children experienced a range of poor health outcomes, such as diarrhoea, malnutrition, cognitive deficits, acute respiratory infections and vector-borne diseases.⁵¹ Public health outbreaks, such as COVID-19, Ebola and cholera, combined with other intersecting disasters, exacerbated poor drinking water, sanitation and hygiene provisions and infrastructure and highlighted the critical role of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in both preventing and controlling epidemic and endemic diseases.

Climate action

34. At the time of reporting, the Sustainable Development Goal targets relating to climate and environmental action were not on track, with the climate crisis threatening to roll back progress on all children's rights.

35. Owing to physiological impacts of extreme temperatures and pollution, increased incidences of water-borne diseases and broader ranges of disease vectors, an estimated near 90 per cent of disease attributable to climate change was borne by children under 5 years of age.⁵² Air pollution was estimated to kill more than 500,000 children each year on average.⁵³ Approximately 93 per cent of children under 15 years of age breathed air that was so polluted that it risked their health and development.⁵⁴ Over 300 million children lived in areas that had extremely toxic air, exceeding World Health Organization (WHO) thresholds sixfold. Over a third of the world's children had elevated lead levels in their blood, which can affect brain development and result in potential lifelong cognitive and developmental impacts.⁵⁵

36. Extreme weather events increasingly threatened children's right to education by disrupting educational services and destroying schools, while exposure to higher-than-average temperatures was associated with decreased academic performance.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ The impact is also of relevance to other children discriminated against on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity.

⁴⁸ UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2000–2020*.

⁴⁹ UNICEF, *Water Under Fire Volume 3: Attacks on Water and Sanitation Services in Armed Conflict and the Impacts on Children* (New York, 2021).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Guy Hutton and Claire Chase, "Water supply, sanitation, and hygiene", in *Disease Control Priorities*, 3rd ed., vol. 7, *Injury Prevention and Environmental Health*, Charles N. Mock and others, eds. (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2017).

⁵² See www.unicef.org/environment-and-climate-change.

⁵³ WHO, "Air pollution and child health: prescribing clean air", summary (Geneva, 2018).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ See www.unicef.org/press-releases/third-worlds-children-poisoned-lead-new-groundbreaking-analysis-says.

⁵⁶ R. Jisung Park and others, "Heat and Learning", *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, vol. 12, No. 2 (May 2020).

37. In 2019, about 500 million children lived in areas with an extremely high risk of flooding owing to extreme weather events and rising sea levels, and nearly 160 million children lived in areas of extreme or high risk of drought. A projected one in four children will live in areas of extreme water stress globally by the year 2040. Research suggests that climate-induced mobility will result in a huge remapping of the world's populations as millions of children and their families become uprooted.⁵⁷ Countries affected by fragility and conflicts are the least prepared to mitigate the risks associated with impacts of climate change, leaving their populations in the most vulnerable.⁵⁸

38. In Human Rights Council resolution [45/30](#) on the rights of the child: realizing the rights of the child through a healthy environment, States are urged to consider recognizing a right to a healthy environment in national legislation for present and future generations.

Protection of children and gender equality

39. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the achievement of protection-related and gender equality targets for ending child marriage and female genital mutilation, child labour, violence against children and gender-based violence, as well as for obtaining justice for children and birth registration services, were already off track.

40. The COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding containment measures further impeded progress and heightened the risk for children of experiencing or being exposed to violence at home, in institutions and online, as well as the risk of their mental health being affected. The pandemic further strained financial investments in preventing and responding to violence, given that over 1.8 billion children in 104 countries were affected by the disruption of protection-related services.⁵⁹ Reductions in the accessibility and availability of birth registration services had an impact on children from the most marginalized and hard-to-reach groups, while containment measures and subsequent service disruptions affected justice for children. In parallel, in 2020, as part of measures taken to prevent and mitigate against the COVID-19 pandemic, 37 countries released over 11,600 detained children.⁶⁰

41. The COVID-19 pandemic undermined progress made towards achieving gender equality, affecting girls with disabilities and the access of girls to education, as well as causing an increase in unpaid care work. Lockdowns and school closures worsened a shadow pandemic of gender-based violence, with multiple countries reporting an increase in domestic violence, which affected girls for the most part.⁶¹ Gains made to end child marriage and to eliminate female genital mutilation risked being reversed, with an estimated 10 million additional girls facing child marriage over the next decade as a result of the pandemic⁶² and an estimated additional 2 million cases of female genital mutilation expected over the next decade.⁶³

⁵⁷ UNICEF, "The climate crisis is a child rights crisis", fact sheet (New York, 2019).

⁵⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross, *When Rain Turns to Dust: Understanding and Responding to the Combined Impact of Armed Conflicts and the Climate and Environment Crisis on People's Lives* (Geneva, 2020).

⁵⁹ UNICEF, "Protecting children from violence in the time of COVID-19: disruptions in prevention and response services" (New York, 2020).

⁶⁰ UNICEF, *Access to Justice for Children in the Era of COVID-19: Notes from the Field* (New York, 2020).

⁶¹ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, "COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls", brief (New York, 2020).

⁶² UNICEF, "COVID-19: a threat to progress against child marriage" (New York, 2021).

⁶³ United Nations Population Fund, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family planning and ending gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage", interim technical note (n.p., 2020).

42. Global estimates at the beginning of 2020 indicated that 160 million children were in child labour, of whom 79 million were in hazardous work that directly endangered their health and safety. Child labour was more common in rural areas, predominantly in agriculture and within families, and was frequently associated with being out of school. An estimated nearly 9 million additional children could be pushed into child labour by the end of 2022 owing to increased poverty levels triggered by the pandemic.⁶⁴ School closures resulting from the pandemic made children more susceptible to recruitment and use by parties to conflict,⁶⁵ as well as to trafficking, sexual exploitation and recruitment into criminal gangs. The risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by those providing assistance and services is also expected to increase as household resources are depleted and reliance on aid increases.

43. The number of grave violations against children in armed conflict remained alarmingly high in 2020. The recruitment and use of 8,521 children by parties to conflict was verified. Of particular concern were a 90 per cent increase in verified cases of child abduction and a 70 per cent increase in verified cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence against children between 2019 and 2020.⁶⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic increased the vulnerability of children in conflict-affected settings, placing an additional burden on child protection actors and reducing opportunities for United Nations engagement with parties to conflict.⁶⁷

IV. Critical enablers of the realization of children's rights in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

A. Participation of children

44. In recent years, many Governments have promoted the participation of children through children's parliaments and children's councils. In Ecuador and Peru, such bodies were established under constitutional law and a ministerial resolution, respectively, and in Thailand, they were provided with a specific national budget item. In a few countries, such as Argentina and Portugal, strict diversity criteria were met to effectively ensure that all groups of children were represented therein. Along with such initiatives, several countries have adopted and are implementing national strategies on the participation of children in policymaking and decision-making processes to ensure that the views of children are given due weight in the design and development of policy, legislation and research. Certain countries, such as Ireland and Mexico, offered practical tools, such as participation hubs and operational manuals, to safely, effectively and meaningfully fulfil the right of children to be heard and listened to. In addition, in their 2020 voluntary national reviews, a number of countries explicitly referred to the active participation of children, supporting their right to be heard.⁶⁸

45. In 2020, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children conducted a mapping exercise that demonstrated the role that children could play in preventing and responding to violence in their communities,

⁶⁴ International Labour Office and UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward* (New York, 2021).

⁶⁵ See [A/HRC/46/39](#).

⁶⁶ See [A/75/873-S/2021/437](#).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, High-level political forum on sustainable development, *Voluntary National Reviews Synthesis Report* (n.p., 2020).

was well as their role as agents of positive change who could help to reach those left furthest behind.⁶⁹

46. Societal norms, insufficient resources and a lack of support from adults, however, continued to inhibit the meaningful participation of children, in particular in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁰

B. Public budgeting

47. Many countries saw a decrease in 2020 in budget expenditure in one or more social sectors, including education, child protection, drinking water, sanitation and hygiene and nutrition,⁷¹ in response to the pandemic, which risked leaving the most vulnerable groups without adequate social protection coverage and which had an impact on all children's rights.⁷²

48. The impact of COVID-19 on growth, international trade and capital flows, domestic revenues and social sector budgets resulted in increasing inequality between and within countries. It reduced the ability of governments, in particular in low-income and debt-distressed environments, to maintain social services.⁷³ In 2020, over 200 million children lived in countries in or at high risk of debt distress, and the cost of servicing debt continued to restrict social spending, a risk especially acute in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.⁷⁴ This not only perpetuated intergenerational transmission of poverty but also had a specific impact on the rights of every child, including with regard to health, education, drinking water, sanitation and hygiene and social protection.

C. Data and monitoring

49. High-quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data are crucial to measuring the progress of the 2030 Agenda, informing inclusive policy, programme planning and service delivery and ensuring that no child is left behind. Notwithstanding considerable progress made in recent years, supported by the mobilization of a data revolution, entire groups of people are not being counted, and important aspects of children's lives are still not being measured.

50. For example, the realization of the rights of children with disabilities is impeded by data gaps.⁷⁵ Similar gaps pose great challenges in understanding the true dimension of urban inequalities, with national and urban averages tending to mask the experience of urban children and families and failing to capture interurban and

⁶⁹ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, *Children as Agents of Positive Change: A Mapping of Children's Initiatives across Regions, towards an Inclusive and Healthy World Free from Violence* (New York, 2021).

⁷⁰ Joining Forces, "Children's right to be heard: we're talking; are you listening?", policy brief (n.p., 2021).

⁷¹ UNICEF, "Tracking the situation of children during COVID-19", dashboard. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/rapid-situation-tracking-covid-19-socioeconomic-impacts-data-viz/> (accessed on 1 September 2021).

⁷² Ugo Gentilini and others, *Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-time Review of Country Measures*, World Bank (Washington, D.C., 2020).

⁷³ UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, "COVID-19 and the looming debt crisis", Policy Brief series, Brief No. 2021-01, *Protecting and Transforming Social Spending for Inclusive Recoveries* (Florence, Italy, 2021).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ UNICEF, *Global Annual Results Report 2018: Goal Area 5* (New York, June 2019).

intra-urban disparities.⁷⁶ Country-level averages can also mask gaps in levels of birth registration among children living outside a household, undocumented nationals, refugees and migrants, children belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and other groups that are at particular risk of statelessness and of being left behind in the birth registration process. This is often the case in countries plagued by ongoing and protracted crises and neighbouring countries that host refugees and migrants fleeing conflict and instability.⁷⁷

51. Efforts to end multidimensional child poverty are fully dependent on the availability of disaggregated data. In 2020, and for the first time, the Sustainable Development Goals portal included multidimensional child poverty indicators,⁷⁸ including both disaggregated national multidimensional poverty measures and child-specific multidimensional poverty measures.

D. Multi-stakeholder partnerships

52. To achieve the 2030 Agenda for children, multi-stakeholder partnerships are crucial in mobilizing and sharing expertise, financial resources, technologies and knowledge. Examples include the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children, the Action Network for Early Childhood Development, the Initiative for Child Rights in the Global Compacts, the Children’s Environmental Rights Initiative, the Justice for Children call to action, the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, the Global Partnership for Education and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

53. Other initiatives, such as the Education Cannot Wait fund, uphold the right to education in humanitarian crises to ensure that all children can adequately gain access to education in emergencies, while the Prospects Partnership helps to foster an enabling environment for socioeconomic inclusion, improve access to education and protection for vulnerable children on the move and strengthen the resilience of host communities in the context of forced displacement crises.

E. Enhanced synergies between international and national human rights mechanisms and the Sustainable Development Goals follow-up and review

54. Given the importance of human rights in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, monitoring by and recommendations from international human rights mechanisms constitute a wealth of information relevant to the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda at the country level.

55. In addition, when they are involved in the reporting process, independent human rights institutions at the national level can strengthen the implementation of the Goals. Such institutions are uniquely placed to contribute to, monitor and follow up on a human rights-based approach to the 2030 Agenda, including a child rights perspective. For example, the national human rights institution in Chile is taking an active role in building a bridge between human rights and Goal 14 to ensure a human rights-based approach to the sustainable development of the fisheries and aquaculture

⁷⁶ UNICEF, *Advantage or Paradox? The Challenge for Children and Young People Growing Up Urban* (New York, 2018).

⁷⁷ UNICEF, “Birth registration for every child by 2030: are we on track?” (New York, 2019).

⁷⁸ See <https://data.unicef.org/resources/briefing-notes-on-sdg-global-indicators-related-to-children/>.

sectors. Labour rights violations within those industries, including forced labour, child labour and hazardous working conditions, are documented in several countries.⁷⁹

F. Digitalization

56. As recalled by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its general comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, meaningful access to digital technologies can support children to realize the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights.⁸⁰

57. While children account for an estimated one third of Internet users around the world,⁸¹ as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of them rely increasingly on online tools, systems and platforms, allowing for new opportunities for the realization of children's rights, ranging from the infrastructural (facilitating education and health care) to the social (children connecting to learn, play and stay in touch with family and friends). Such increased reliance has made explicit the existing digital divide, reflecting pre-existing economic gaps and discrimination and amplifying the disadvantages of children from poorer backgrounds and other marginalized situations.

58. The digital environment presents challenges and risks for children because their safety is rarely taken into account when it is being designed. For example, the digital environment elevates the risk of exposure to harmful and untrustworthy content, as well as the risk of excessive use. It also provides new ways to perpetrate violence against children by facilitating situations in which they experience violence and/or may be influenced to engage in unlawful or harmful activities.⁸² Children from minority groups continue to be disproportionately affected by hate crimes and hate speech, which have escalated in the digital environment.⁸³ Sex offenders use digital technology to solicit children for sexual abuse and exploitation, including, for example, the production, distribution and live-streaming of child sexual abuse material, online grooming and sexual extortion. Children are increasingly using digital tools that utilize artificial intelligence-based systems, raising child rights issues related to privacy, data protection, consent, accountability, recourse and exclusion.⁸⁴

V. Conclusion and recommendations

59. States are urged to accelerate implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including as a cornerstone of national Sustainable Development Goal implementation, to provide explicit and comprehensive reporting on the situation of children in all Goal-related processes, to conduct meaningful and inclusive consultations with children throughout and to expand children's awareness of their rights and of the Goals, including in schools.

60. States should fully implement their international legal obligations outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child without discrimination, including by recognizing children as rights holders, strengthening national legislation, policies and

⁷⁹ Danish Institute for Human Rights, *National Human Rights Institutions as a Driving Force for Sustainable Development: Good practices for Sustainable Development Goal programming and monitoring* (Copenhagen, 2019).

⁸⁰ See [CRC/C/GC/25](#).

⁸¹ UNICEF and International Telecommunication Union, "How many children and young people have Internet access at home?"

⁸² See [CRC/C/GC/25](#), paras. 54 and 80.

⁸³ See [A/HRC/46/57](#), para. 21.

⁸⁴ See [A/74/821](#).

practices and systematically implementing a child rights approach in decisions and actions to fulfil children's rights in the context of the 2030 Agenda and its central tenet to leave no one behind.

61. States are strongly encouraged to ratify and implement the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. States parties should fulfil their reporting obligations under the Convention and its Optional Protocols through timely submission of reports.

62. States should take the steps necessary to implement the recommendations made by international human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, the human rights treaty bodies and the Human Rights Council special procedures in the context of realizing children's rights and the 2030 Agenda.

63. States must uphold children's civil and political rights and strengthen their legal and policy frameworks in this regard, provide adequate support and protection to children exercising those rights and actively work towards removing barriers that prevent children from gaining access to those rights. States should provide safe and enabling conditions for all children to meaningfully participate in all matters that affect them, including in conflict-affected and fragile settings, recognizing that children's participation also helps to foster peace and social cohesion. States and other relevant actors should provide all professionals working with and for children with specific training on children's rights, including their meaningful and inclusive participation.

64. States should prioritize children in all budget and fiscal policies and measures, including preparedness, prevention and response measures to crises. That includes allocating sufficient and equitable public resources to sectors and services that are critical for children, with a special focus on disadvantaged and marginalized children.

65. States should prioritize investment in universal social protection systems, intensifying efforts to improve the standard of living of children, in particular those who are the most discriminated against and disadvantaged. States should promote inclusive and responsive family-oriented policies, including those designed to strengthen parents' and caregivers' ability to care for children and those that support social policies that address harmful gender norms that affect access to high-quality education and drive child labour. States should urgently scale up cash transfer programmes to reach all children, strengthen public finance response for social protection in the medium and long term and scale up shock-responsive social protection systems.

66. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, States should prioritize the restoration of interrupted child services, including education, nutrition, maternal and newborn treatment, immunization, sexual and reproductive health, treatment for HIV, mental health and psychosocial support, and child social and protection services, ensuring that targeted, proactive approaches are in place to reduce inequalities and include the most vulnerable. In addition, stimulus packages should be guided by a child rights approach and should be aimed at building back better and greener. States should help to implement a global immunization plan, in particular in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

67. States and other relevant actors should work to improve children's right to health, such as by strengthening public health-care systems, increasing accessibility, sufficiency, acceptability, universality and quality of health care, improving the access of children to safely managed drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services, adequate nutritious food programmes and healthy food environments, HIV prevention and treatment programmes, gender- and sexuality-sensitive sexual and reproductive health policies for adolescents and comprehensive sexuality education.

68. States should introduce policies, fiscal measures, strategies and programmes that promote healthy food environments and enable nutritious diets, in particular in early childhood. That includes adopting legislation and regulations to promote the breastfeeding of infants and the provision of healthy foods to children.

69. States should take steps to ensure that children enjoy a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and that they have access to information, meaningful participation and climate and environmental justice. States should put children at the centre of climate change strategies and policy development and should support climate change and environmental education. States should provide a safe and empowering context for initiatives led by children for a healthy, safe and sustainable environment and should ensure their protection from all acts of intimidation, harassment and abuse.

70. States and other relevant actors should address the learning crisis, ensuring the quality, availability, inclusion and accessibility of early childhood development and learning programmes, including pre-primary, primary and secondary education. States should eliminate barriers to education, such as school fees, and ensure that schools adapt to and accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other personal circumstances. States must take proactive steps and guarantee access to education without discrimination and harassment to children who are particularly marginalized.

71. States, in partnership with actors such as independent human rights institutions and civil society organizations, should provide human rights and child rights education to all children as a means to tackle discrimination and prejudice, build intercultural competence and promote meaningful and inclusive participation.

72. States should prioritize the establishment and strengthening of national systems to protect children from all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect, online and offline, including in times of crisis. That includes investing in multisectoral collaboration, including the private sector, strengthening social services for child protection and making systems inclusive to respond to the needs of all children. Such services must include both a focus on primary violence prevention for all children and more targeted prevention and response services for particularly vulnerable children. States should ensure that national legal frameworks provide all children with equal protection from sexual violence and exploitation and that they do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics.

73. States should accelerate action to develop justice systems that guarantee equal access, protection and support for children, including access to free legal aid. They should prevent the unnecessary criminalization of children and their contact with the justice system by making full use of diversion measures and restorative justice, including in humanitarian contexts. States should work to prevent all forms of violence against children in contact with the justice system, including children who are detained owing to their or their parents' alleged or actual association with armed forces or groups, including those designated as "terrorist" groups, eliminate arbitrary or unlawful detention and support the development and application of alternatives to detention. Efforts to release children from detention during COVID-19 should be redoubled.

74. States should take measures to prevent family separation, and family-based alternative care options should be prioritized for children without parental care. The measures involve supporting families and community-based services, implementing international standards for the protection of children at risk of family separation, following the guidelines for alternative care, implementing cross-border child

protection frameworks and ending the institutionalization of children, in particular children with disabilities.

75. States should provide information, services and support to children with disabilities and their families, with a view to preventing concealment, abandonment, neglect and segregation and to ensuring that they have equal rights with respect to family life. States should take appropriate measures to support family- and community-based services, with the best interests of the child being a primary consideration. States and other relevant actors should work to meaningfully involve children with disabilities in the realization of their rights, including in humanitarian settings.

76. States should invest in the development of national capacity to strengthen and promote gender equality in programmes, policies and budgets across sectors, including in support of sexual and reproductive health and rights. States and other relevant actors should scale up programming for girls, including by expanding access to gender-sensitive education, skills development training and health information and services, ensuring the continuation of essential sexual and reproductive health services in crisis situations, addressing gender-based violence, including child marriage and female genital mutilation, and ensuring that girls' opinions are heard and prioritized.

77. States and other relevant actors should protect the rights of asylum-seeking, refugee, migrant, internally displaced and stateless children without discrimination. Such children should receive appropriate protection, assistance and access to services and should be included in health, education, social and child protection systems. They should be protected from discrimination and xenophobia, including on the part of service providers, and proactive steps should be taken to ensure their inclusion in COVID-19 recovery plans and vaccine roll-out. States should eliminate migration-related detention for children, expedite family reunification and prevent unnecessary family separation.

78. States should improve civil registration and vital statistics services to ensure timely birth registration for all children with the provision of a certificate upon birth and the presentation of identification documents, including in humanitarian contexts.

79. States and other relevant actors should facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access in order to provide assistance to children and ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel and assets.

80. States and other relevant actors should take actions to improve the protection of children in conflict situations, including the following:

(a) Endorse and implement the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, the Paris Commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups, the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers and the Safe Schools Declaration;

(b) End impunity for violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations and abuses against children committed by parties to conflicts, by strengthening national judicial processes, developing expertise in investigating and prosecuting crimes against children and increasing support for international judicial mechanisms;

(c) Strictly comply with international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction and proportionality, and take all feasible precautions to avoid the incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects,

including water and sanitation infrastructure. States should also ban anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions and consider ratifying the Arms Trade Treaty;

(d) Treat all children, including those associated with groups designated as “terrorist” groups, primarily as children, develop protocols for the handover of children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups to child protection actors and repatriate foreign children stranded in detention camps in third countries.

81. States should ensure that the private sector carries out human rights and environmental impact assessments in accordance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, incorporate relevant international standards into their operations and hold private actors accountable for child rights violations.

82. In line with the Committee’s general comment No. 25 (2021), States, the private sector and other relevant actors should collaborate on the development and implementation of a safe, inclusive and empowering digital agenda for children. Efforts should include putting children at the centre of digital policy, product and service design and delivery and public and private investment, as well as providing all children with equal and effective access to age-appropriate and high-quality online resources, including digital skills and literacy. Governments, the private sector and other key stakeholders should protect children from online harm by safeguarding privacy and preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse, other forms of violence, including physical or mental violence, bullying and targeted hate speech, including against girls, children with disabilities and minority and LGBTIQ+ children. Appropriate judicial and support services should be made available for children who have been victims of violence or abuse in the digital environment. The digital divide should be bridged by increasing access to information and communications technology, in particular for children in disadvantaged and marginalized situations.

83. States should foster a comprehensive child rights approach to data collection, protection, management and maintenance, including at all levels within the country, and should support and strongly encourage such efforts by the private sector and other actors. This includes improving and securing data collection, compilation and storage methods; strengthening child-sensitive indicators; increasing the disaggregation of data by sex, gender identity, age, disability and other factors relevant to the analysis of inequalities; strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships, including between national statistical offices, independent human rights institutions and civil society organizations; allocating adequate resources to national statistical offices and appointing child rights focal points in those institutions; ensuring adequate investments in community and national data ecosystems; and providing the political and institutional support necessary for data collection, processing, analysis, dissemination and use.

84. In the light of the synergies between the realization of children’s rights and the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is recommended, for the consideration of Member States, that a biennial report on the follow-up to the outcome of the special session of the General Assembly on children be issued as from 2022, at the seventy-seventh session of the Assembly, to both the Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, focusing on children and the Goals. It is also recommended that the report be considered as an input to the high-level political forum on sustainable development. The report would be drafted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in collaboration with relevant United Nations entities.