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Promotion and protection of the rights of children

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

Summary

The present report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children is submitted pursuant to General Assembly [64/146](#). In the report, the Special Representative describes how violence against children continues to be exacerbated worldwide by multiple and overlapping crises, reinforcing the urgent need for sound and sustained investment in integrated child-sensitive and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention for every child. The report has a particular focus on the need to protect children from all forms of violence in the context of travel and tourism. In addition, the Special Representative outlines her engagement with Member States and other stakeholders to support accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as her work as Chair of the United Nations task force on children deprived of liberty.

* [A/78/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. Guided by General Assembly resolution [62/141](#), by which the Assembly established the mandate, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children is a global, independent advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children. In its resolution [76/147](#), the Assembly reaffirmed its support for the work of the Special Representative, recognizing the progress achieved and the role of her mandate in promoting further implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children and in supporting Member States in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Assembly took note, with appreciation, of the Special Representative's leadership in the follow-up to the United Nations global study on children deprived of liberty and encouraged the Special Representative to continue her work in that regard. In the resolution, the Secretary-General requests that the Special Representative continue to submit reports to the Assembly on the activities undertaken to fulfil her mandate, including information on her country visits and on the progress achieved and the challenges remaining to ensure the protection and well-being of children.

2. In the present report, the Special Representative identifies key global challenges that are increasing children's exposure and vulnerability to violence, with a particular focus on the protection of children in the context of travel and tourism. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had a substantial impact on the travel and tourism sector, with severe economic consequences for many States worldwide. As the sector recovers, the Special Representative emphasizes that it must do so in a manner that ensures the protection of children from all forms of violence – including trafficking, child labour and diverse forms of exploitation – leaving no child behind.

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

A. Children are paying a high price

3. Children's vulnerability to violence has continued 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 under the 2030 Agenda to end all forms of violence against children. The impact of violence is devastating, immediate and lifelong. It impairs children's brain development, their physical and mental health and their ability to learn. In addition to the human cost, the economic costs are staggering (see [A/HRC/49/57](#)).

4. Children continue to feel the impact of COVID-19, with around 100 million additional children falling into multidimensional poverty as a result of the pandemic.¹ In 2022, the births of around one in every four children under the age of 5 worldwide were never officially recorded (see [A/78/80-E/2023/64](#)). Poverty is a powerful driver of violence, including child labour, child marriage, child trafficking, child sexual exploitation and the recruitment of children into criminal, armed and/or violent extremist groups. In addition, the cumulative shocks of the climate crisis are exacerbating other ongoing crises – including the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic – and acting as a threat multiplier for violence against children. The United Nations Children's Fund estimates that 1 billion children are at extremely high risk of being affected by the climate crisis.² Meanwhile, around 1.5 billion children under the

¹ See www.unicef.org/social-policy/child-poverty.

² See United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis* (New York, 2021).

age of 15 have no access to social protection, and progress on coverage has stalled worldwide since 2016.³ Education has been affected by years of underinvestment and learning losses, with some 84 million children expected to be out of school by 2030, while 300 million children or young people will leave school unable to read and write (ibid.).

5. The number of children on the move, including refugee and displaced children, is increasing. Worldwide, around 43.3 million children had been displaced as a consequence of conflict and violence by the end of 2022. They included some 17.5 million child refugees and asylum seekers and an estimated 25.8 million displaced within their own country. Another 3.8 million children have been internally displaced by natural disasters.⁴ Every child on the move is exposed to multiple forms of violence and harm throughout their journey, as highlighted so starkly by the continuing and tragic loss of life among these children on their journeys worldwide.

6. Available 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.⁵ At least 200 million girls and women alive today in 31 countries with data have undergone female genital mutilation.⁶ 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 reach the age of 18 by 2030.⁷ In most countries, more than two in every three children are subjected to violent discipline by caregivers.⁸ An estimated 105 out of every 100,000 children are in residential care worldwide,⁹ and 30 per 100,000 are in detention.¹⁰ Children account for 35 per cent of all identified victims of trafficking, and global estimates for modern forms of slavery indicate that there are 3.3 million children in forced labour – with more than half of these ensnared in commercial sexual exploitation.¹¹ Online risks to children are mounting: the World Health Organization has highlighted that 15 per cent of children reported cyberbullying victimization and that 32 million reports of child sexual exploitation images were identified by electronic service providers in 2021.¹²

7. Exposure to violence is becoming a new normal for many children, with online and offline violence often interconnected. Urgent action is needed to tackle the continuum of violence against children, based on a lifecycle approach that spans the

³ See International Labour Organization (ILO), “More than a billion reasons: the urgent need to build universal social protection for children”, March 2023. Available at www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_869602.pdf

⁴ See UNICEF, “Worldwide, about 43.3 million children had been displaced as a consequence of conflict and violence as of the end of 2022”, June 2024.

⁵ See ILO and UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward* (New York, 2021).

⁶ See UNICEF, “Female genital mutilation (FGM)”, Child Protection database. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation>.

⁷ See UNICEF, “Child marriage”, Child Protection database. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage>.

⁸ See UNICEF, “Violent discipline”, Child Protection database. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/violent-discipline>.

⁹ See UNICEF, “Children in alternative care”, Child Protection database. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/children-alternative-care>.

¹⁰ See UNICEF, “Justice for children”, Child Protection database. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/justice-for-children>.

¹¹ See *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022); and ILO, Walk Free and International Organization for Migration, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* (Geneva, 2022).

¹² See National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, “2022 CyberTipline Reports by Electronic Service Providers” (Alexandria, Virginia, National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2023). Available at www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/2022-reports-by-esp.pdf.

early identification of vulnerabilities, protection and support for all children without discrimination and encompasses their participation as actors of change.

B. Investment is needed more than ever

8. The Special Representative has continued to use her mandate to address these challenges and advance children's protection from violence through her advocacy, advisory and bridge-building roles. While promoting holistic and integrated action to tackle all forms of violence and its drivers, the Special Representative has focused on specific areas, including the investment case for ending violence; violence against children and the climate crisis; children on the move; and children in the digital environment.

9. The Special Representative continues to make the economic case for more investment in the prevention of and response to violence against children as essential for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, following the presentation of her 2022 annual report to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/49/57). She has engaged with many States across all regions to discuss the establishment and strengthening of integrated approaches to tackle violence against children, as well as the high returns on investing in such approaches. As well as jointly hosting a ministerial meeting on the margins of the General Assembly, the Special Representative has systematically promoted these approaches on every country visit. In addition, she has facilitated peer-learning exchanges between officials in different States on how to assess returns on investment in integrated child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention services. The Special Representative is developing further guidance to assist States in undertaking such assessments in the framework of a formal cooperation with Iceland.

10. Building on her last report to the General Assembly and the related advocacy brief on the climate crisis and violence against children, the Special Representative has continued to promote the need for child-sensitive climate laws and policies that are backed by adequate resources and monitoring.¹³ She welcomes the recent adoption by the Committee on the Rights of the Child of its general comment No. 26, on children's right to a healthy environment, to which she contributed. In addition, the Special Representative provided a submission to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in June 2023 to support the development of an advisory opinion on the climate emergency and human rights, as submitted by Chile and Colombia.

11. The Special Representative continues to promote the need for non-discriminatory access to children's services – including birth registration, social welfare, justice, health, education and social protection – for all children on the move, beyond emergency situations. The Special Representative has launched an advocacy brief and call for action on the urgent need to enhance protection for children on the move in times of crisis with a range of United Nations entities and in partnership with the Special Representative and Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.¹⁴ The Spanish actress, Penelope Cruz, embraced the joint call wholeheartedly and supported the advocacy of the Special Representative with a powerful video message.

12. While the digital environment offers new opportunities for the realization of children's rights, it carries risks for the violation of those rights. The Special Representative stresses the urgent need to strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks

¹³ See United Nations, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, "The climate crisis and violence against children", October 2022.

¹⁴ See UNICEF, "Protecting the rights of children on the move in times of crisis", May 2023.

to ensure children's protection and privacy online, including in the context of 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. Voluntary approaches by industry to ensure that its services and platforms are safe for children are insufficient, as outlined in the Special Representative's report to the Human Rights Council in March 2023 and the accompanying advocacy brief.¹⁵ In addition, the Special Representative conducted an opinion poll of more than 600 children from different regions about their views on online safety in collaboration with the WeProtect Global Alliance. Results revealed that 8 out of 10 children think that they are likely or very likely to experience things online that may harm them or make them feel unsafe. The children indicated that they want stronger laws to address this, as well as clear ways to report harmful and abusive content within online platforms.¹⁶

C. Wide mobilization on many fronts

13. In advocating for stronger action to tackle such challenges as part of her support for the accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda, 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

14. The Special Representative continued her close engagement with and support to Member States. The voluntary national review processes offer a key opportunity to identify and report on promising practices and initiatives for tackling violence against children in the context of Sustainable Development Goal implementation and ensuring children's involvement in these efforts. The Special Representative developed and shared a suite of guidance and tools¹⁷ and, in 2023, met with 33 Member States presenting their voluntary national reviews, in addition to the European Union – the first regional organization to present a voluntary review. In addition, she mobilized the United Nations system at the country level to help ensure relevant technical support.

15. The theme of the 2023 high-level political forum on sustainable development, "Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels", 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. Furthermore, she contributed to preparatory processes for the forum, including regional forums for sustainable development, the second global workshop for voluntary national review countries and the expert group meeting on 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.

16. The number of invitations and requests for country visits continues to increase. Since her previous report to the General Assembly, the Special Representative has visited Andorra, Côte D'Ivoire, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Fiji, Jamaica,

¹⁵ See United Nations, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, "Urgent action needed to ensure a safe, inclusive and empowering digital environment for children", 17 March 2023.

¹⁶ See United Nations, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, "Violence against children and the digital environment: a child-friendly version of 2023 report to the Human Rights Council", 2023.

¹⁷ See <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/content/2030-childrens-rights-agenda>.

Kenya, Latvia, Lithuania, Morocco, Senegal, Solomon Islands, Spain and Viet Nam. Visits to Iceland and Lebanon were welcome opportunities to follow up on previous visits.

17. The country visits of the Special Representative 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 scaling 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. In addition, she makes site visits to a range of social service providers for children, as well as places of detention.

18. The country visits conclude with the identification of road maps for action by Governments, the United Nations country team and development partners, emphasizing the need for an integrated approach to violence prevention that strengthens national and local systems sustainably. Furthermore, the Special Representative emphasizes the importance of reflecting 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.

19. The Special Representative welcomed commitments at the highest political level during all her visits to investment in children's protection and well-being and had the opportunity to advocate their translation into concrete action. They 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 Spain and Viet Nam. Moreover, countries visited by the Special Representative, including the Dominican Republic and Latvia, have introduced measures to enhance institutional and policy frameworks to ensure children's protection and well-being. The Special Representative promoted further action to define the integrated chain of services required to tackle violence against children and map existing services so that they can be matched to needs, as seen in Jamaica. In addition, countries have 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 Ethiopia and Iceland. The Special Representative also welcomed initiatives in Fiji and the Solomon Islands to assess the cost of violence against children and the high returns that can be achieved through effective violence prevention.

20. One key dimension of the Special Representative's visits is the mobilization and inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders in action to end violence. In particular, she promotes the involvement of children in decision-making processes, which was evident in a range of countries visited, including Kenya. The strong role of religious and community leaders in efforts to tackle violence and in challenging social norms that condone or support violence was another area in which her visits highlighted promising practices, as in Lebanon and Senegal.¹⁸ In addition, the Special Representative has highlighted the critical role of civil society partners and the need to strengthen their networks and advocacy capacity.

¹⁸ See, for example, www.unicef.org/lebanon/qudwa and www.crsdsenegal.org.

21. While the Special Representative promotes integrated action to end all forms of violence in all settings, her country visits highlight the need for a particular focus on children at higher risk. In that connection, the Special Representative welcomed efforts to use the deprivation of liberty only as a measure of last resort and to increase the use of alternatives to institutionalization for children in need of care and protection, including in Lithuania. She welcomed measures by Andorra to ensure the social inclusion of children with disabilities as a key protective factor. The Special Representative also drew attention to the situation of children living and working on the streets during her country visits, recalling the need to establish integrated, protective support systems for those children before, during and after their time on the street, and welcomed steps taken to support their sustainable reintegration in Côte d'Ivoire and Morocco.

22. The Special Representative has emphasized the interlinkages between violence against women and violence against children during every visit, emphasizing the need to end domestic violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage and promote gender equality and empowerment.

Regional engagement

23. 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 action on a range of specific issues.

24. 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 and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Building and strengthening child protection systems has been a central theme of the Special Representative's 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 of Ukraine, the safe return of children, and family reunification. The need to tackle the drivers of and demand for child trafficking and criminal trafficking networks has been a further important dimension of the Special Representative's advocacy and support for regional and subregional organizations, including the Economic Community of West African States. She has continued to promote the need to incorporate child rights and child protection into action to combat the climate crisis through her participation in the Arab Climate Outlook Forum and in the ninth International Policy Conference on the African Child, on the theme "Climate change and child rights in Africa – impact and accountability". Amplifying the voices and involvement of children in regional processes and mechanisms has been another crucial dimension of the work of the Special Representative, as highlighted by her support for the Movimiento Mundial por la Infancia de Latinoamérica y El Caribe and for the first Africa Children's Summit in April 2023. This child-led event facilitated dialogue between policymakers and children and provided concrete recommendations for the African Union, the United Nations and African Governments.

United Nations and international organizations

25. The Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children continues to be an important forum for information-sharing and joint initiatives with United Nations partners and relevant mandate-holders to end violence against children. 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 supported the consideration of the relevant outcomes of the universal periodic review – in particular linkages with the recommendations accepted by States – in efforts to end violence against children and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. One key development has been the finalization of a United Nations system-wide guidance note on the mainstreaming of children’s rights. The note is aimed at making the rights of children, including their meaningful participation, an integral element in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of United Nations policies and programmes and in the assessment of the implications for children of any action taken by the United Nations.

26. As Chair of the United Nations task force on children deprived of liberty, the Special Representative works closely with Member States, the Non-Governmental Organizations Panel on Children Deprived of Liberty and other relevant stakeholders to promote the key message that preventing and ending the deprivation of liberty of children is both urgent and possible. She noted progress during the reporting period on raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, ensuring child- and gender-sensitive justice and making better use of technology and other innovations to enhance children’s access to justice as core components of the implementation process for the 2030 Agenda. While global data on the use of alternatives to deprivation of liberty and institutionalization remain sparse, the Special Representative will work closely with other members of the task force to identify strategies to close this gap. To support its 2022 joint pledge to end child immigration detention – linked to objective 13 of the Global Compact for a Regular, Safe and Orderly Migration – the task force is developing advocacy briefs on ending child immigration detention and on protecting children from deprivation of liberty in the justice system.

27. The Special Representative is the 2023 Co-Chair of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons alongside the International Organization for Migration. As Co-Chair, she highlights the need to counter trafficking in children as an issue that cuts across every thematic priority of the Group’s workplan for 2023.

28. 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. Through her Office, the Special Representative on Violence against Children facilitated the participation of an 18-year-old activist from Cameroon, the founder of the non-governmental organization “Children for Peace”,¹⁹ who presented the views of young people and civil society to the Council.

29. The Special Representative and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime have developed a joint strategy for programmatic cooperation on violence against children. The Special Representative participated in the thirty-second session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in May 2023, at which she highlighted the need to secure access to child-sensitive justice, tackle violence online and protect children on the move. The Special Representative 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

¹⁹ See <https://children4peace4p.org>.

other crimes, as well as on the promotion and implementation of stronger safeguarding for child victims.

30. The Special Representative and the International Telecommunication Union have continued to jointly lead an intersectoral and collaborative initiative on protection through online participation with more than 30 partner organizations. This is aimed at enhancing understanding of how children and young people use digital platforms to access protection when they are at risk of violence, whether online or offline.²⁰ The Special Representative has engaged closely with the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Technology to explore ways to promote the inclusion of the rights and protection of children in the proposed Global Digital Compact. This has included the Special Representative briefing delegations during a “deep dive” on guaranteeing the protection of children’s rights within the Compact.

Civil society and faith-based organizations

31. The Special Representative collaborates closely with civil society organizations through joint advocacy, research and information exchange. She has continued to build bridges between such organizations working to end violence against children based in New York and Geneva, as well as connecting with those working at the grass-roots level during her country visits, when they are systematically invited to join the network of civil society partners that meets regularly with the Special Representative.

32. The Special Representative works closely with religious leaders and faith-based organizations and communities, which are 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 the Adyan Foundation (Lebanon), the Federation of Koranic Schools (Senegal), the Pacific Conference of Churches (Fiji), Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas (Morocco) and national Christian organizations (Kenya and Cote d’Ivoire). The Special Representative 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.

Increasing involvement of children

33. During the reporting period, the Special Representative consulted with more than 1,200 children from all regions on multiple issues. This included consultations with children before the presentation of her annual reports to the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. The outcomes informed the Special Representative’s interactive dialogues with the Assembly and the Council, respectively, and the finalization of child-friendly versions of her annual reports. In particular, her consultations and interactions with children were focused on children from diverse and vulnerable communities, including children deprived of liberty, refugees and migrants, children in street situations, children with disabilities and children living in poverty.

34. The Special Representative systematically amplifies and gives visibility to action by children to prevent and address violence through a digital participation map.²¹ More than 50 examples of how children are acting in ways that are part of the solution have recently been added to this repository, which now contains information from more than 90 countries across all regions. The most recent initiatives highlighted include those related to peer education on children’s rights, training on sexual and reproductive health to prevent violence, the creation of a mobile school for street

²⁰ See <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/content/pop>.

²¹ See <https://childparticipation.un.org>.

children, and the development of an app to tackle female genital mutilation by connecting affected girls to medical and legal aid.

35. The Special Representative has developed a series of child-friendly resources in collaboration with groups of children who are knowledgeable on the specific issues addressed.²² She has also developed and disseminated guidelines to help the United Nations and others to develop child-friendly resources and engage with children, which have been welcomed and widely used.

III. Rethinking travel and tourism

36. The travel and tourism sector plays a key role in supporting the livelihood and development of communities and countries worldwide. The promotion of responsible, accessible and sustainable tourism is also an important dimension of achieving the 2030 Agenda. However, many child protection challenges emerge in the context of travel and tourism, whether as a result of offenders moving within or between States or as an unintended result of the activities and operations of the sector itself.

37. There has never been a more pivotal moment to ensure that the travel and tourism sector is truly sustainable, with child protection at its core. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on the sector, as well as on the communities and States for which the sector represents an important source of income. The number of international tourist arrivals reached 80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels in the first quarter of 2023, according to the World Tourism Organization.²³ However, as the domestic and international travel and tourism sector continues to revive, it cannot be a case of recovery at any cost. We cannot go back to what was normal before the pandemic, because what was normal was not good enough.

38. It is time to rethink the way in which travel and tourism is conducted and to create a truly sustainable industry. Discussions on sustainability in the sector have rightly incorporated environmental, economic and social dimensions. However, freedom from violence against children is also fundamental for sustainability. It is impossible to achieve genuinely sustainable growth – including within travel and tourism – and realize the promise of the 2030 Agenda while this violence and its drivers persist.

39. With just seven years remaining to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we are not on track, and hard-won progress on protecting children from violence has faltered. However, the challenges for ensuring the protection of children in travel and tourism can be overcome.

40. The Special Representative is grateful for submissions received from Member States²⁴ and for consultations with various stakeholders, including representatives from the United Nations, regional organizations, civil society, law enforcement, industry and children, from which she has drawn illustrative examples for this section of her report.

²² See <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/child-participation-altogether/child-friendly-materials>.

²³ See World Tourism Organization (WTO), *World Tourism Barometer*, vol. 21, No. 2 (May 2023).

²⁴ In response to a note verbale transmitted by the Special Representative on 18 April 2023, contributions were received from the following Member States: Belarus, Colombia, Ghana, Ireland, Israel, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Mongolia, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Slovenia, Türkiye and Uruguay.

A. Increased mobility, increased risks

41. The COVID-19 pandemic caused travel and tourism to grind to a halt in 2020 and 2021 while also disrupting child protection systems and efforts to tackle the violence against children that occurs in the sector. Traveller numbers are now climbing as the industry recovers, with international tourism receipts rising again to reach the \$1 trillion mark in 2022 and more than 960 million tourists travelling internationally in the same year,²⁵ a figure that does not include the millions of trips made by people within their own countries for both leisure and business. In addition, the most recent estimates suggest that around 169 million people are international migrant workers, who constitute 4.9 per cent of the global labour force and are concentrated in the services sector.²⁶

42. As traveller numbers increase, along with the accessibility of local and remote areas, so too do the risks to children. The more people travelling, the greater the likelihood that they will include offenders who inflict violence on children with impunity,²⁷ as their mobility presents challenges for ensuring justice and accountability. There is a risk that, in the drive to meet growing demand, businesses in the travel and tourism sector may neglect the measures required for protecting children and overlook the need to safeguard children's rights in every facet of a reviving sector's operations and value chains, including the prevention and identification of and response to violence against children.

43. Evolving modes of travel and tourism also intersect with violence against children. One of the trends that has shaped the growth of travel and tourism in recent years is the decentralization of travel towards more tailored and individual experiences, such as community tourism and various forms of voluntourism with and for children – including in orphanages and alternative care settings – which brings travellers and children into closer contact than more traditional locations or forms of tourism.²⁸ The greater digitalization of travel, combined with new forms of interaction from the dark web to unregulated and informal travel and tourism, can put children at higher risk. This shifting landscape generates new avenues that can be used by offenders, traffickers, intermediaries and criminal networks to exploit children.²⁹

44. All of this is happening against a backdrop of increasing vulnerability of children. As outlined in the present report, children worldwide face multiple and overlapping crises that increase the risks of experiencing violence, including in the context of travel and tourism. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, these vulnerabilities presented enormous challenges for children's safety, as did the gaps in the legal protection of children, weak enforcement of the laws that were in place, underreporting and underprosecution of offences, social tolerance of violence, and widespread impunity and corruption.

45. These push and pull factors combine to fuel various forms of violence against children everywhere, including in the context of travel and tourism. For example, the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism continues worldwide. Although

²⁵ WTO, *World Tourism Barometer*, vol. 21, No. 2.

²⁶ See ILO, *ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: Results and Methodology*, 3rd ed. (Geneva, 2021).

²⁷ See Angela Hawke and Alison Raphael, *Offenders on the Move: Global Study on sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism* (Bangkok, ECPAT International, 2016).

²⁸ The 2023 report of the Special Rapporteur to the General Assembly on the sale and sexual exploitation of children will focus on the issue of voluntourism, for which reason that issue is not addressed in further detail in the present report.

²⁹ See ECPAT International, "Taking stock: implementation of the recommendations from the global study on sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism and the call for action from the International Summit on Child Protection in Travel and Tourism", April 2023.

there are challenges for measuring the extent of sexual violence against children within this specific context, existing data on sexual violence against children online and in person more generally – which include the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism – are very concerning. The United Nations Children’s Fund estimates that around 1 in 10 girls under the age of 20 have been forced to engage in sex or perform other sexual acts.³⁰ The Special Representative has also been alerted to the increasing number of boys who are victims of sexual violence.³¹ Sexual offenders are known to misuse travel and tourism infrastructure and services, increasingly in combination with digital technologies, to commit their crimes. They often target children using these technologies, seeking online and in-person contact with children in their own countries and abroad. The sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism can happen in any kind of venue or location and in any country in the world. It may also be shifted away from a location when prevention efforts increase and relocated elsewhere. There is no typical profile for either victims or offenders. Offenders can be international or domestic tourists, young or old, male or female and wealthy or budget travellers and may be travelling for leisure or in transit for work. This form of sexual exploitation takes many forms, including temporary so-called “marriages” for the purpose of sexual exploitation.³²

46. Child labour in the travel and tourism sector also has many faces, some of them well hidden. Children may be seen out in the open, selling souvenirs on the street or beach, carrying luggage, waiting tables and more. They may work behind the scenes, washing dishes or cleaning guests’ rooms. Or they may be completely hidden from sight in massage parlours, brothels or even their own homes, where they endure sexual exploitation.³³ Despite the lack of current estimates of the total number of children employed in the formal or informal travel and tourism sector, approximately 25 per cent of the world’s child labourers are thought to work in the services sector. This sector includes hotel employees and tour operators, transportation workers and porters, and a host of other service providers, many of whom work directly or indirectly for tourists.³⁴ Child labour has risen as a result of the severe economic hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with an additional 9 million children thought to be at risk of being pushed into child labour by the end of 2022.³⁵

47. The travel and tourism sector is also misused for human trafficking, with traffickers moving their victims via aeroplanes, trains and buses and booking hotel rooms for their exploitation.³⁶ Traffickers follow the movements of travellers and respond to demand, with child victims of trafficking and modern forms of slavery exploited for a variety of purposes, including sexual and economic exploitation.

48. Travel for business and work, including for large development and infrastructure projects, poses risks if it creates an environment in which violence is tolerated in locations around or near travellers’ accommodation, places of work or transportation hubs. It is also important to note the diverse aspects of transportation as possible channels for the facilitation of violence against children, including buses, trains, taxis, private transport, and other transportation-related services, such as those managed through online platforms.

³⁰ See www.unicef.org/protection/sexual-violence-against-children.

³¹ See <https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative>.

³² Hawke and Raphael, *Offenders on the Move*.

³³ See ILO, “It’s not child’s play: forms of child labour in tourism” (n.d.). Available at https://webunwto.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/imported_images/36465/19htaskforcemeetingreport2006novgunnilo.pdf.

³⁴ See Jeremy S. Goldstein, “CSR best practice for abolishing child labour in the travel and tourism industry”, *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, vol. 44, No. 4 (April 2020).

³⁵ See ILO and UNICEF, *Child Labour*.

³⁶ See <https://wtcc.org/initiatives/sustainable-growth>.

49. Large influxes of visitors associated with major sporting or cultural events can heighten risks to children. In addition, vulnerable children and families may even find themselves uprooted as locations are “air-brushed” to enhance a country’s image before a major event.³⁷ The development of travel and tourism infrastructure can also have wider social implications, in particular for communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion. While such development can enhance local prosperity, it can also exacerbate existing problems by displacing communities, disrupting their livelihoods or putting pressure on basic services.³⁸ The impact on marginalized and Indigenous communities, in particular, can be marked.

50. The travel and tourism sector now has an unprecedented opportunity to embed the protection of children and the assessment of risks and impacts on children into every stage of its development and operating practices – throughout value chains and destinations – as it continues to rebuild after the pandemic. This opportunity cannot be missed. The sector can build upon the measures that it had put in place before the COVID-19 pandemic to spearhead solutions. These encompass child protection measures in services and infrastructure; staff training and “zero-tolerance” policies; regular due diligence processes and impact assessments conducted on children’s rights; strong reporting mechanisms; and cooperation with law enforcement.

B. Revisiting and revitalizing action

51. A solid foundation for action is already in place to confront the challenges and risks outlined above. Important steps have been taken by a wide range of stakeholders – including the travel and tourism sector itself – at the global, regional and national levels to ensure effective prevention, response and support for child victims of violence in the context of travel and tourism.

52. At the global level, the declaration and call for action resulting from the first International Summit on Child Protection in Travel and Tourism, held in 2018, served to outline key steps to ensure proactive, comprehensive, context-specific and sustainable prevention, as well as strong legal frameworks to ensure the protection of children and the prosecution of offenders. The declaration and call for action built on the findings and recommendations of the landmark 2016 report entitled *Offenders on the Move: Global Study on the Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism*³⁹ while encompassing forms of violence beyond sexual exploitation.

53. In the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights of 2011, the United Nations outlines the steps that companies should take to know and show respect for human rights (A/HRC/17/31, annex). The Children’s Rights and Business Principles of 2013 build on the Guiding Principles by setting out the actions that companies can take to protect children’s rights, including their right to freedom from all forms of violence in the context of travel and tourism.⁴⁰ The Environmental and Social Framework of the World Bank is aimed at protecting people from potential adverse impacts – such as trafficking and child labour – that could arise from Bank-financed projects, including those related to the development of the travel and tourism sector.⁴¹

54. The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism of the World Tourism Organization, which was a voluntary framework for responsible and sustainable tourism

³⁷ Hawke and Raphael, *Offenders on the Move*.

³⁸ See Bureau Wyser and UNICEF, *Assessment of the Impact of Tourism on Communities and Children in Zanzibar* (2018).

³⁹ Hawke and Raphael, *Offenders on the Move*.

⁴⁰ See UNICEF, The Global Compact and Save the Children, “Children’s rights and business principles”, 2012.

⁴¹ See www.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/environmental-and-social-framework.

development, was converted into a binding instrument in 2019 entitled the Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics. Under the Framework Convention, States parties are invited to cooperate to criminalize offenders responsible for the exploitation of children both in their country of nationality as well as in the country where they commit their crimes, complementing existing child rights standards.⁴² As of June 2023, four States had acceded to the Framework Convention (Albania, Lebanon, Nigeria and Seychelles), and there was one further signatory (Indonesia).

55. The Regional Action Group of the Americas for the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism is an example at the regional level of tackling violence against children within and beyond the sector. It has been active in promoting national codes of conduct on child protection for the travel and tourism industry, and there has been a gradual increase in their adoption across the region.⁴³ The Regional Action Group, the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of ASEAN and the South Asian Initiative to End Violence against Children have also endorsed and committed to use a legal checklist developed by ECPAT International that supports States in ensuring a robust legal and policy framework to protect children from sexual exploitation in travel and tourism.⁴⁴

56. States have introduced legislative and other measures to enhance the protection of children from violence in the context of travel and tourism. There has been some progress in ensuring the criminalization of the exploitation of children in the sector, including technology-facilitated crimes against children, and in ensuring extraterritorial jurisdiction to tackle impunity.⁴⁵ States have also taken steps to ensure that regulatory bodies with oversight or inspection functions incorporate the protection of children into their mandates, for example in relation to labour inspectorates tasked with tackling child labour and ensuring decent working standards.⁴⁶ Some States have introduced mandatory codes of conduct and child protection standards for the travel and tourism sector.⁴⁷ Requirements for companies to analyse their impact on respect for human rights – including in relation to trafficking, contemporary forms of slavery and child labour – have also been introduced as part of their due diligence obligations.⁴⁸

57. States have worked to ensure that national policies or strategies on travel and tourism include prevention of and response to violence against children as an integral component while supporting coordination across relevant government entities.⁴⁹ This has been complemented by other measures such as awareness-raising campaigns targeting the public, the travel and tourism sector and other stakeholders⁵⁰ and training

⁴² WTO resolution 722(XXIII) on the Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics and its Optional Protocol, was adopted during twenty-third General Assembly session at St. Petersburg on 12 September 2019. See www.unwto.org/unwto-framework-convention-on-tourism-ethics.

⁴³ ECPAT International and Grupo de Acción Regional de las Américas, “An overview: codes of conduct on child protection for the travel and tourism industry in the Americas”, November 2020.

⁴⁴ See ECPAT International and others, “Legal checklist: key legal interventions to protect children from sexual exploitation in travel and tourism”, 2022.

⁴⁵ The legal checklist of Foundation ECPAT International includes the criminalization of grooming of children for sexual purposes and the establishment of extraterritorial jurisdiction. See also the ECPAT Global Progress Indicators, available at <https://ecpat.org/our-impact>.

⁴⁶ For example, the National Programme to Combat Child Labour, 2017–2023, in Türkiye.

⁴⁷ See regional reviews from Africa, Latin America, South Asia and Southeast Asia, available at <https://ecpat.org/story/regional-overviews-2022>.

⁴⁸ Provisions of this kind have been introduced in Australia, France, Germany and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

⁴⁹ For example, strategy 5 of the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030 of Malaysia; and the operation of the Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Sexual Violence and Comprehensive Care for Child and Adolescent Victims of Sexual Abuse in Colombia.

⁵⁰ For example, the TurismoXLaNiñez Initiative promoted by Mexico.

for front-line professionals, including those in law enforcement.⁵¹ States have made efforts to tackle the lack of data by generating evidence, in collaboration with other partners.⁵² They have also continued to strengthen child protection systems to identify children at risk, support victims and ensure access to justice, as outlined in the present report.

58. The travel and tourism sector has been engaged in efforts to tackle violence against children. Child protection is increasingly recognized as an intrinsic element of a holistic approach to the development of sustainable travel and tourism. It has, for example, been included in the action framework for the travel and tourism sector of the World Travel and Tourism Council, on preventing human trafficking, and in the Global Sustainable Tourism Council criteria.⁵³ At the national level, chambers of commerce are engaged in raising awareness and disseminating information among their members on the protection of children.⁵⁴

59. The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism is a global, multi-stakeholder initiative that is aimed at raising awareness and providing tools and support to the travel and tourism industry to assess risks and impacts on children, understand the issue of sexual exploitation and take action to prevent this crime. As of March 2023, more than 400 member companies were implementing the Code criteria.⁵⁵ The inclusion of companies working predominantly online – such as booking platforms for accommodation in private homes and for transport – among Code members is welcome.⁵⁶ The financial sector is also making a contribution, for example through the development of indicators to help detect financial transactions relating to online child sexual exploitation.⁵⁷

60. A range of law enforcement measures are in place to stem violence against children in the context of travel and tourism. They include INTERPOL green notices: international alerts that notify all countries about a person's criminal activities and their potential threat to public safety. In addition, INTERPOL mobilizes specialized experts to help police in its member countries to build their capacity to investigate child sexual exploitation, organizing training courses in every region. Topics covered include methods for the conduct of investigations in the online environment, the use of the INTERPOL International Child Sexual Exploitation database, victim identification, victim and offender interview techniques and the categorization and triage of child sexual abuse materials.⁵⁸

61. The Virtual Global Taskforce – an international alliance of 15 dedicated law enforcement agencies – was established in direct response to the rise in offenders targeting children worldwide through online social interactions and travelling overseas to commit contact sexual abuse. The Taskforce works with civil society and

⁵¹ For example, campaigns promoted by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare in Mauritius to tackle the commercial sexual exploitation of children, including engagement with youth and community centres and training programmes for law enforcement.

⁵² The Ministry of Environment and Tourism in Mongolia is developing a methodology to measure tourism-related statistics, including an indicator of child labour in tourism settings.

⁵³ See www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria.

⁵⁴ For example, the initiative of the Empowering Children Foundation and the Chamber of Commerce of the Polish Hotel Industry to distribute model procedures on addressing child exploitation to accommodation establishments across Poland.

⁵⁵ See <https://thecode.org>.

⁵⁶ See <https://thecode.org/ourmembers>.

⁵⁷ For example, Project Qawaq (One Who Sees), led by Scotiabank and ECPAT-CHS Alternativo in Peru, is developing indicators to help detect financial transactions for online child sexual exploitation.

⁵⁸ See www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Crimes-against-children.

industry partners to deliver a programme of innovative global strategies to help protect children online, no matter where they are in the world.⁵⁹

62. Civil society organizations and networks continue to play a key role in raising awareness, generating evidence, providing guidance and support to States and industry, monitoring progress and providing services for victims and survivors. They also take a lead in ensuring the inclusion of children's experiences and perspectives in the context of travel and tourism. A project in Thailand, for example, involves youth mobilizers receiving small grants to organize awareness-raising activities with their peers, enhancing the resilience and capacity of children and young people to defend themselves against sexual exploitation, to report cases and to access services.⁶⁰ In Costa Rica and Ecuador, a project is aimed at developing child participation models for use by governments and the private sector as part of an initiative to build sustainable tourism destinations that protect children from sexual exploitation.⁶¹

63. Notwithstanding the progress achieved, it is not happening at the scale, speed or consistency required to tackle violence against children effectively in the context of travel and tourism. We need to go further and faster, ensuring a true convergence of action that avoids parallel initiatives and duplication. To that end, it is necessary to pursue a multi-stakeholder, multisectoral and child rights-centred approach, in which the entire ecosystem of actors involved in this sector moves ahead as one on several fronts.

64. States should acknowledge the extent of the problem and continue to strengthen and effectively implement legal, regulatory and inspection frameworks to ensure children's protection in person and online. This should include the enactment of comprehensive extraterritorial jurisdiction and extradition legislation and effective international cooperation among law enforcement agencies. It is equally important to ensure the provision of integrated, child-friendly services to victims, including access to justice and effective remedies.

65. If they have not already done so, companies involved in travel and tourism must incorporate child protection measures into their business models, conduct due diligence processes on children's rights and support prevention and response to violence against children in their operations and throughout value chains, including businesses that operate online and with the informal sector. While voluntary action to raise child protection is important, this should be complemented by mandatory regulation and monitoring.

66. Other stakeholders also need to be fully supported and engaged to play their part. Law enforcement agencies need major investment to ensure that they have the capacity to deal with critical issues, including ensuring better exchange of information and improved collaboration to end impunity for offenders within and across national borders, as well as corruption. Civil society organizations need greater investment so that they can carry out their key roles, from conducting advocacy around violence against children to reacting quickly and ensuring the activation of national protection systems. Finally, all action must be informed by the views and experiences of children. Ongoing efforts to ensure the inclusion of children's experiences and perspectives in the context of travel and tourism should be replicated and widely promoted.

⁵⁹ See <https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/virtual-global-taskforce>.

⁶⁰ Project run by ECPAT International, ECPAT Foundation Thailand, Phang-Nga Children's Home, and DISAC Surathani.

⁶¹ Project run by ECPAT International with Fundación Paniamor, Costa Rica, and Fundación Quito Raymi, Ecuador.

IV. The clock is ticking

67. The world is not on track to end all forms of violence against children and keep the promise made under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in this regard. Too many children are still left behind in all settings, including in the context of travel and tourism.

68. There is a greater need than ever to rethink what it means to make travel and tourism sustainable. It is not possible to deliver sustainable growth and development without investing in integrated, child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention in every sphere. Equally, it is not possible to separate action aimed at ensuring sustainable travel and tourism from action aimed at ending violence against children, given the interlinked nature of the Sustainable Development Goals.

69. The travel and tourism sector can play a leading role in accelerating the 2030 Agenda, acting as a bridge between economic growth, environmental conservation and social development. The sector can provide significant benefits to local communities by creating job opportunities, ensuring decent work, preserving cultural heritage, tackling poverty and discrimination, developing infrastructure and investing in child and social protection services.

70. The travel and tourism sector can be a driving force for strengthening partnership and cooperation because it engages a wide range of stakeholders from the private and public sector, including local communities. Effective partnership is the only path to ensuring that the travel and tourism sector is truly sustainable, with child protection at its core.
