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DEBATE QUESTIONS

International Conference

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

AT A CROSSROADS:

Evolving Humanitarian Crises



KINGDOM OF BELGIUM
Federal Public Service
Foreign Affairs,
Foreign Trade and
Development Cooperation

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Until every girl is free

With the support of:



National Commission
on the Rights of the Child

SETTING THE SCENE

AN INTRODUCTION

Each year on 20 November, we mark World Children's Day to commemorate the 1989 adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – the most widely ratified human rights treaty. By ratifying this international legal instrument, States acknowledge that all children have inalienable rights and commit to protecting and upholding those rights. **This year, the Convention will celebrate its 35th anniversary – but is it really a time for celebration?**

Children's rights are human rights. Sadly, never since the adoption of the CRC have children's rights been in greater jeopardy than today. Children are living in a world that is less and less inclined to respect their rights.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the **experience of children impacted by conflicts**. Today, it is estimated that 400 million children – or about 1 child in 5 – are living in or fleeing from conflict zones. Many are being injured, killed, abducted or sexually violated. They are losing family members and friends. Their schools and hospitals are attacked. And some are being recruited and used by armed forces or groups. Many of them have been displaced multiple times, risking separation from their families, losing critical years of education and fraying ties to their communities.

Experience from crisis situations shows that **girls are the most vulnerable, particularly to the risks of gender-based violence and abuse**. They are specifically at risk of sexual or economic exploitation. Girls are the first to drop out of school when a crisis affects their community and early marriages increase dramatically. That is why their specific needs must be addressed.

The United Nations has verified more than 315,000 grave child rights violations in areas under conflict between 2005 and 2022. These verified cases are only the tip of the iceberg: the actual number of violations is probably much higher.

Children's rights are also severely under threat beyond conflict zones. The notion of what constitutes a 'humanitarian crisis' is rapidly evolving. Rising poverty and inequality, public health emergencies, a learning crisis and the global climate crisis are all threatening children, their rights and their well-being.

Climate change, in particular, is an existential threat to the health and well-being of this and future generations of children. The extent and magnitude of the triple planetary crisis, comprising the climate emergency, the collapse of biodiversity and pervasive pollution, is an urgent and systemic threat to children's rights globally.

More than 1 billion children currently live in countries that are at extremely high risk of the impacts of climate change. This means half the world's children could suffer irreparable harm as a result of climate change.

Meanwhile, the **cumulative effect of multiple crises**, including years of COVID-related disruptions, a looming global economic recession and disruptive technologies is eroding well-being for many around the world and is **taking a toll on mental health**, including that of children and adolescents. While the age of technology and digital access provides a vast potential for realizing children's rights and opportunities, the spread of digital technologies also comes with a broad spectrum of risks and harms to which children can be particularly vulnerable. Mental health is a global issue, with diagnosable mental health conditions affecting about one in seven, or 14% of children and adolescents aged 10-19. The main preventable causes of poor mental health occur in childhood. Protective factors, such as loving caregivers, safe school environments, and positive peer relationships can help reduce the risk of mental disorders. However, significant barriers, including stigma and lack of funding from governments, are preventing too many children from experiencing positive mental health and accessing support when they need it.

WORKING GROUP 1A

CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT – PROTECTION OF EDUCATION

Attacks on and military use of education facilities frequently occur during armed conflict, disrupting and destroying education and the opportunities that it brings.

In 2022-23, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) identified around 6.000 reported attacks on students, educators, schools and universities, as well as cases of parties to conflict using educational facilities for military purposes. Attacks on education and military use increased by nearly 20% compared to the two previous years. More than 10.000 students and educators were reportedly killed, injured, abducted, arrested or otherwise harmed by attacks on education in 2022 and 2023. Attacks also damaged or destroyed hundreds of education facilities, forcing temporary or permanent closures and causing weeks or months of lost learning.[1]

Education is a fundamental right, enshrined among others in Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. When affected populations lose access to education, they do not only lose the opportunity to acquire essential skills and knowledge for the future. They also lose the protection it offers to children and young people. Schools and more broadly educational facilities should be safe places where children and young people can learn safely and be free from exposure to other risks.

There is a clear gender dimension to the issue of attacks against education. When conflict erupts, girls are often the first to drop out of school and the last to return to the classroom. Girls in crisis-affected countries are nearly 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than those living in countries not in crisis. To ensure that all young people, including girls, have access to schooling during conflict, gender-based obstacles to education must be addressed.

Refugee children face very particular challenges, such as a different language and curriculum, or in the case e-learning is on offer: decent access to the internet and ICT equipment.

Another angle is the role of education to reintegrate children after periods of conflict – for instance, former child soldiers going back to school to learn skills and find a place within society again.

[1] Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, "Education under Attack 2024", <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/>.

Protecting and ensuring access to education during conflict is enshrined in international humanitarian law. A fundamental voluntary commitment can be found in the Safe Schools Declaration, currently endorsed by 120 countries. In the context of reintegration, the Paris Principles and Commitments on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups play an important role.

The objective of the panel discussion is to assess the challenges for education caused by armed conflict, but also to look at ways to better protect education from attacks: from preventative measures when conflict seems likely, to Action Plans and awareness raising with warring parties, to alternative education methods such as e-learning and actions like distributing gender-sensitive teaching resources and working with parents and community leaders to combat practices discriminating against girls.

DEBATE QUESTIONS

- **What more can be done to increase support for and implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration and its underlying objectives?**
- **What more can be done to preventatively protect education – from early warning systems, to continued access to education, to avoiding military use of educational facilities?**



WORKING GROUP 1B

THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A CHILDREN'S RIGHTS CRISIS

The world is in a state of climate emergency, which undoubtedly impacts the current lives, futures, rights and well-being of children worldwide. The unique vulnerability of children to climate change has been demonstrated by the latest available data, which highlight the risks to – among others - children's survival, health and well-being. Today, 1 billion children are at extremely high risk of the impacts of the climate crisis, threatening their ability to survive, grow and thrive and deepening existing inequities. Currently, 559 million children are exposed to high heatwave frequency, rising to over 2 billion children globally by 2050. Over the last six years, 43.1 million internal displacements of children were linked to weather-related disasters – the equivalent of approximately 20,000 child displacements per day.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) addresses environmental issues in Article 24 on the right to health and Article 29 on the right to education, by which States are required to direct the education of children to the development of respect for the natural environment. Since the adoption of the CRC, many links between children's rights and environmental protection have been identified. The emergence of unprecedented climate crises and the difficulties they pose in terms of realizing children's rights prompted the Committee on the Rights of the Child to adopt a General Comment on the subject in 2023 ([CRC/C/GC/26](#)).

This General Comment 26 (GC26) gives more information on how children's rights are violated and guides State parties on how to better respect and realize children's rights in the context of climate change. GC26 shows how children are uniquely vulnerable to climate change whilst also underlining their important role as agents of change, emphasizing their rights to be heard, to be informed and to access justice in the context of climate change.

As Article 12 CRC clarifies, children have the right to be heard, according to age and maturity, on all matters affecting them. All around the world, children feel that climate-related issues are extremely important for them. Although these issues are complex, children's opinions should be proactively sought and given due consideration in the design and implementation of policy measures to tackle climate change, which have a significant impact on their lives.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child is currently drafting a General Comment on Children's Rights to Access to Justice and Effective Remedies. This is particularly timely, as more and more children are seeking access to justice and speaking up to defend and claim their rights on climate-related issues.

Despite children having been at the vanguard of several environmental and climate change cases and notwithstanding their recognition under the CRC as rights holders, children still face various challenges, as justice systems are all too often not child-friendly and as the cross-boundary character of climate change responsibilities and consequences ramifies the quest for climate justice.

On 29 March 2023, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the historic resolution requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on climate justice. This inspirational and currently pending case, pushed by many children and young people, may help to clarify States' obligations to protect the rights of present and future generations against climate change and make global progress toward intergenerational equity and climate justice.

DEBATE QUESTIONS

- **How could meaningful child participation mechanisms be set in place to guarantee that their voices truly impact policymaking?**
- **How can climate litigation support the further clarification of States' responsibilities in terms of the impact of climate change on children's rights?**



WORKING GROUP 2A

GIRLS IN CRISES – ADDRESSING THEIR SPECIFIC NEEDS

On the eve of the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and halfway to the 2030 deadline for the SDGs, the world is failing girls. Based on current trends, the end of child marriage, for instance, remains a distant goal, with the grim estimate that it could take 300 years to eliminate this harmful practice. By 2030, an estimated 110 million young women and girls who should be receiving an education may find themselves denied that opportunity.

Although gender inequalities have always existed, in all societies and at all times, crises exacerbate pre-existing risks of discrimination against girls and also generate new forms of prejudice against girls. Adolescent girls in particular are often forgotten in emergencies and face specific challenges during crises. They are at higher risk of experiencing sexual and gender-based violence everywhere: within their families, communities, in intimate relationships, at school, in the workplace, virtually and even when accessing humanitarian assistance.

Sexual violence has been shown to increase in each of these settings during crises, and is often used as a weapon of war. Conflict, insecurity and economic hardship fuel harmful practices. Girls' mobility typically becomes more restricted to their home environment, limiting their access to information, support networks, education and services, often with life-long and devastating consequences. The invisibility of girls in crises leads humanitarian actors to largely overlook their needs.

Girls are often denied the choices, opportunities and life-saving information and services needed to prevent early or unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, and to manage the consequences of sexual violence. Due to lack of support from their families and communities, stigma and lack of privacy and confidentiality, girls often struggle to access health services, in particular sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), if these are available at all.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action require States to take all the necessary actions to protect girls from violence and to ensure they can fully develop their potential. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes targets under Goal 5 to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls including trafficking, sexual and other types of exploitation, child, early and forced marriages, female genital mutilation and violations of sexual and reproductive rights.

Violations of sexual and reproductive health rights, such as forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced pregnancy, criminalization of abortion, denial or delay of safe abortion and/or post-abortion care, forced continuation of pregnancy, and abuse and mistreatment of women and girls seeking sexual and reproductive health information, goods and services, are moreover linked to structural discrimination and are forms of gender-based violence.

Girls' distinct needs, vulnerabilities and capacities demand specific attention and recognition in policies related to ending violence against children. Addressing inequality and discrimination, investing in girls' education and creating an enabling environment so that girls are empowered to take on their future is thus necessary. Their right to participate should be at the heart of crisis response work, including violence prevention. Indeed, girls around the world are fighting back against discrimination and stereotypes. They are actively challenging gender bias. The agency, capacity and strength girls demonstrate are remarkable. They are powerful agents of change.

DEBATE QUESTIONS

- **What steps should be taken to accelerate achieving the targets under Goal 5 of the SDGs to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls? How can gender-based violence, including violations of sexual and reproductive health rights, be addressed against the background of an increasingly assertive anti-gender movement?**
- **How can the voices of girls in humanitarian crises be amplified? Which concrete measures can be taken to stand with young activists in their efforts to drive positive change?**



WORKING GROUP 2B

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT (MHPSS) IN EMERGENCIES

Globally, over 250 million children and adolescents experience mental health conditions. This is only the tip of the iceberg as many of them still are undetected and unsupported. Mental health is a global issue, with detectable mental health conditions affecting 14% of children and adolescents aged 10-19.[2] Half of all mental health conditions emerge before the age of 14, and early onset in childhood or adolescence of conditions like anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression is associated with worse life outcomes.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) enshrines the right of every child and adolescent to good mental health and well-being in Article 24. Moreover, mental health is also part of several other rights, including the right to be heard, on information, on education and on rest, leisure and play.

One of the most powerful risk factors for mental health conditions among children and adolescents is exposure to life-threatening events such as natural or human-made emergencies. More than 20% of children and adolescents affected by emergencies are likely to experience a mental health condition. Unfortunately, millions of children around the world suffer unthinkable distress due to armed conflict, natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies. They may be forced to flee their homes, some separated from their parents and caregivers along the way. During conflict, they may endure staggering violence, severe injuries and the threat of recruitment into armed groups. Many are cut off from basic services, which are essential to child protection. Throughout these severe adversities, children often lack access to mental health and psychosocial support, with potentially devastating long-term effects. Crisis situations also put parents, caregivers and service providers under mental and psychosocial duress, which can prevent them from providing the protection, stability and nurturing care their children need during and after an emergency.

Because humanitarian crises have a long-lasting impact on mental health and psychosocial well-being, it is essential to "build back better" systems and services. All sectors play a critical role in ensuring that their activities are delivered in a way that promotes mental health and psychosocial well-being - also known as using an "MHPSS approach". MHPSS can be integrated into programming across different sectors and areas of work like health, education, child protection, gender-based violence, mine action, nutrition, shelter, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) and food security.

[2] UNICEF, State of the World's Children, 2021.

Education, mental health and economic potential are interconnected, with a strong linkage between child and adolescent mental health and educational achievement. Interventions to promote mental health and psychosocial well-being in educational settings before, during and after emergencies prove to be beneficial over the longer term by preventing and mitigating negative downstream impacts of psychosocial distress, such as reduced learning outcomes, cognition, and lifetime earning potential. Moreover, when implemented in education settings, MHPSS interventions can reach a high number of children and make an important contribution to achieving the SDGs. Recent studies furthermore demonstrate that investing in MHPSS-related education programs is found to be beneficial for children and economies.[3]

In May 2024, a historic milestone was achieved at the World Health Assembly with the unanimous adoption of a resolution on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in emergencies. This resolution arrives at a critical juncture as the world faces an increasing number of humanitarian emergencies exacerbated by climate change, conflicts, and other global challenges. It underscores the global consensus on the critical nature of mental health and psychosocial well-being during crises, emphasizes the necessity for coordinated action among international actors and shows a universal commitment to include MHPSS as an integral component of preparedness, response, and recovery activities and across all aspects of emergency responses.

DEBATE QUESTIONS

- **What MHPSS approaches and/or which tools can be used to integrate, coordinate and mainstream the mental health and well-being of children into emergency responses and how do these include the participation of beneficiaries and their contexts, including the most vulnerable?**
- **How can MHPSS in education settings prevent and address mental health conditions among children and adolescents? What does practice tell us?**

[3] UNICEF, The global costs and benefits of mental health and psychosocial support interventions in education settings across the Humanitarian Development Nexus, 2023.