

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AT A CROSSROADS: EVOLVING HUMANITARIAN CRISES

Main Challenges and Concluding Recommendations*

GENERAL

Armed conflicts are increasing, affecting millions of children globally and leading to violations such as killings, kidnappings, recruitment into armed groups, and sexual violence. Additionally, rising poverty, inequality, public health emergencies, a learning crisis, and the global climate crisis all threaten children, their rights, and their well-being. Ensuring that international frameworks protecting children's rights are respected and holding violators accountable remains a significant challenge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Integrate children's rights** into all humanitarian interventions.
- **Using all available means to protect and strengthen legal and policy frameworks** by ensuring respect and enforcement of international human rights and humanitarian law instruments during emergencies, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Translate frameworks and commitments into concrete actions on the ground.
- **Combat impunity and hold those responsible for child rights violations accountable** in appropriate courts and through all available mechanisms, both at the national and the international level, such as the International Criminal Court, the European Court of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice.
- **Create awareness and increase the political cost** by demanding that governments strongly condemn violations of children's rights, including attacks against education.
- **Promote access to justice** to strengthen the legal foundations that allow for complaints to be filed at the national or international level.

** These recommendations stem from the working groups during the international conference organized by FPS Foreign Affairs Belgium, UNICEF Belgium, and Plan International Belgium, held in November 2024, bringing together international experts on children's rights.*



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CHILD PARTICIPATION

Participation is one of the core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and despite the ongoing challenges to children's rights, it remains a vital part of the solution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Ensure and support meaningful and inclusive participation.** This is the responsibility of states, NGOs, youth organizations, magistrates, and other duty bearers. Proactively seek out the voices of (the most vulnerable) children and prioritize their participation in all processes affecting their lives, such as climate-related litigation and policy-making. Remove the many administrative barriers that slow down participatory processes.
- **Provide funding and resources** to amplify the voices of children and strengthen their knowledge and skills through education and training.

EDUCATION

Education is under severe threat, with a significant rise in attacks on schools, teachers, and students. These attacks not only disrupt learning but also undermine children's mental health and socio-economic futures, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability. Despite international protective frameworks, there is a substantial gap between these frameworks and their practical application, making it crucial to ensure that educational institutions remain safe sanctuaries for children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Continue to promote the endorsement** of the Safe Schools Declaration and other international instruments and **protect educational institutions** such as schools, teachers, and students by effectively implementing the principles behind these instruments.
- **Document and make visible** attacks on education to the widest audience.
- **Criminalize attacks** on education and prosecute those responsible. Ensuring the enforcement of existing rules, using all available means, and mobilizing necessary resources are vital to uphold international law and bring perpetrators of child rights violations to justice.
- **Ensure access to education** in conflict zones, recognizing its role in realising all children's rights, peacebuilding and long-term stability. It is through education, and only through education, that children can become aware of their rights and have them respected.
- **Strengthen and harmonize protection standards** for the right to education, while closely monitoring their implementation and violations.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The climate crisis poses a significant threat to children's rights, with extreme weather events such as severe heatwaves and floods threatening access to food, causing displacement, worsening poverty, and fueling new conflicts, impacting nearly one billion children. Despite being at the forefront of environmental cases and recognized as rights holders under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children also face challenges due to non-child-friendly justice systems and the complex nature of climate change responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement policies** to mitigate the impacts of climate change on children, focusing on food security, displacement, and poverty reduction.
- **Involve children** in decision-making processes related to climate change, ensuring their voices are heard and considered.
- **Support legal battles** aimed at holding governments accountable for their inaction on climate change.
- **Support and recognize children** in their role as key actors in raising global awareness on climate issues.
- **Provide funding and resources** to amplify the voices of marginalized children and support their advocacy efforts.

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Mental health of young people is under significant strain due to conflicts and crises. A high prevalence of mental disorders among adolescents is exacerbated by violence, deprivation, displacement, and separation. Coordinating efforts across multiple sectors to provide effective mental health and psychosocial support is a major challenge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Integrate mental health and psychosocial support** into all humanitarian interventions aimed at supporting children in crisis, ensuring a multisectoral approach, and coordinate efforts at both local and national levels based on the specific needs of children.
- **Exchange and share best practices** and align these practices to build a shared understanding of the interventions, procedures, and actions needed to improve children's mental health.
- **Equip parents, teachers, and close family members** (the educational community) with the skills and resources needed to support children's mental health. Providing safety in learning spaces is the core of any psychosocial mental health intervention.
- **Offer support to frontline workers** who face distressing situations daily, helping them better assist children on their journey to resilience.

ADDRESSING THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF GIRLS

Girls face unique challenges in conflict and crisis settings, including increased sexual violence and discrimination. Access to education, healthcare, and freedom of movement are further restricted due to the increasing number of armed conflicts, intensifying natural disasters, and the resurgence of anti-gender backlash.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Mobilize the entire UN system** to counter gender-based oppression and classify these types of human rights violations as “gender apartheid”.
- **Provide comprehensive support** to survivors of gender-based violence, including legal, psychological, and social services.
- **Ensure close collaboration** among humanitarian aid, development cooperation, and child protection services for women and girls who have experienced gender-based violence.
- **Adapt national legal frameworks** to fully integrate children’s and women’s rights.
- **Encourage local actors in initiatives** aimed at tackling the root causes of gender equality, by encouraging men to become allies in the fight to reduce violence against women and girls.
- **Create safe spaces for women and girls** during conflict or crisis, where they can express themselves freely and share their experiences without fear of retaliation or pressure.
- **Recognize girls for their leadership potential** while integrating them early into decision-making processes and supporting them to fulfil this role.