



CHILD RIGHTS INPUT

High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals for leaving no one behind

“Every child has the right to live in peace, health and safety. Today and every day, let’s protect and support children as they meaningfully contribute to making our world a better, brighter, more peaceful place for all people.” – UN Secretary-General António Guterres

March 2025

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Children make up a third of humanity, and fulfilling their rights is fundamental to advance solutions for the 2030 Agenda. In these challenging times global cooperation is urgently needed to defend children's rights and reverse their erosion. Transformation toward sustainable, fair, and inclusive systems that prioritize children's needs can be supported by the international human rights framework, which provides accountability, prevention and guardrails during crises.

- ✓ *Children must be empowered as active rights-holders and agents of change, with their voices heard and listened to in key decisions affecting them.*
- ✓ *SDG actions should prioritize child protection in crises and investment in children's rights at all levels, ensuring a focus on the most vulnerable, including children in situations of conflict.*
- ✓ *Investing in children's health, education, and social protection remains a crucial priority, and efforts to advance the 2030 Agenda should lead to the maximum available resources being allocated for children.*
- ✓ *Policies and actions to fulfil children's rights and needs must be backed by robust monitoring and disaggregated data.*

ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACTS OF MULTIPLE AND INTERCONNECTED CRISES ON CHILD RIGHTS WITH RESPECT TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SDGS

The present input is submitted following a request of the Human Rights Council for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to contribute to the work of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), by providing comprehensive input from a child rights perspective to its yearly thematic reviews of progress.¹

Children make up a third of humanity, and upholding their rights is at the heart of governments' obligation to safeguard and advance human rights globally.² The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified human rights treaty - representing a strong signal of the commitment of states to protect and promote the rights of every child, without discrimination. Yet the gap between the rights enshrined in the Convention and the reality on the ground for children around the world is increasing - and in a world facing multiple crises, it is often children who suffer first and worst.³

Interconnected global crises are having profound and disproportionate impacts on the rights of children, undermining the progress made towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those presently under review - SDGs 3, 5, 8, 14, and 17. Children's rights are at risk as hard-won gains made over decades are being eroded or even reversed due to major

political, technological, and climatic shifts, alongside ongoing conflicts. ⁴ Children are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of conflict and climate change due to their sensitive phase of physical and cognitive development. Intersecting crises are also exacerbating physical and mental harm to children, including physical, sexual, and emotional violence, with lasting impacts on their development and well-being. As the world grapples with gaping inequalities and poverty, many children face an uncertain future, subject to ongoing threats of violence, including cyberbullying and exploitation in the digital space. ⁵ At the same time, half of all children globally still lack access to quality online resources, perpetuating the digital divide and limiting their educational opportunities.

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child every child has the right to develop to the maximum extent possible, the right to protection from violence, exploitation and abuse, the right to education, and the right to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. In order to uphold children's rights in a world facing multiple intersecting crises, it is crucial to reinvigorate multilateralism and cooperation, prioritizing children's rights across policies and programs at global, national and local levels. A child's chance at a life in dignity should not depend on who they are or where they were born: governments and all stakeholders must renew their commitments and responsibilities under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and cooperate to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of all children.

A CONCERNING PUSHBACK ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

There is a concerning global trend whereby efforts to protect children's rights are being undermined or reversed through political resistance, legal changes, and social dynamics. This includes, for example, regressive legislation weakening child protection laws, such as relaxing age-based labor laws for marginalized children. Moreover, implementation of children's rights under the CRC is highly inconsistent both between and within countries. Violations against children, such as physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and child trafficking, continue to rise, exacerbated by conflict, economic instability, and austerity measures that cut public spending on child welfare programs. Additionally, political opposition, often driven by nationalistic or conservative ideologies, is challenging established global child rights norms.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS FOR CHILDREN IS FALTERING

Millions of children around the world continue to face severe barriers to their rights, with over 385 million children living in extreme poverty, surviving on less than \$1.90 per day. Additionally, an estimated 1.3 billion children are affected by multidimensional poverty, lacking access to essentials such as education, healthcare, and clean water. ⁶

Child mortality rates remain alarmingly high, with 5.3 million children under the age of five dying from preventable causes in 2022. ⁷ These deaths highlight significant gaps in healthcare services, safe drinking water, and nutrition. Nearly 1 billion children lack access to safe drinking water, and 1.7 billion children are without basic sanitation, exacerbating preventable diseases

and malnutrition.⁸ 1 in 3 children under 5 are not growing and developing well due to malnutrition, and 202 million children under the age of 5 years live in severe food poverty.⁹

The fundamental right to education remains unfulfilled for many: approximately 244 million children are out of school globally. More than 5.7 million primary-school-age children are not attending school, with the most significant barriers faced by children in conflict zones and low-income countries.¹⁰

Moreover, violence against children is pervasive, with up to 1 billion children experiencing some form of physical, emotional, or sexual violence each year.¹¹ Domestic violence is particularly alarming, with 2 in 3 children—around 1.6 billion—experiencing violent punishment at home, including both physical and psychological aggression.¹² The impact of violence on children is profound, with higher risks of mental health issues, physical injuries, reproductive health problems, and long-term developmental delays.¹³

IN A WORLD FACING MULTIPLE CRISES, CHILDREN OFTEN SUFFER FIRST AND WORST

Children in conflict zones or fragile states are disproportionately impacted by disruptions and shortfalls in essential services, with around 500 million children—approximately 1 in 4 children globally—living in areas affected by armed conflict or high levels of violence, facing extreme deprivation and hardship.¹⁴ In conflict situations the impacts on children are far-reaching, as the millions of children affected miss out on essential protection, medical care, education and nutrition during their developmentally crucial formative years. Moreover, nearly half of all child deaths under five occur in areas affected by conflict.¹⁵ In 2023, 32,990 grave violations against children were verified in 26 conflict zones, a 35% increase from previous years, disrupting essential services and threatening to create a “lost generation.”¹⁶

Further, ongoing and new armed conflicts have led to an increase in the recruitment and exploitation of children by armed groups, including abduction, forced labor, and sexual violence. Between 2005 and 2022, more than 105,000 children were recruited into armed groups, though the actual number is likely much higher. In 2022 alone, 27,800 violations against 18,890 children were reported, including 8,630 killings, 7,622 instances of recruitment, and 3,985 abductions. Tragically, instead of receiving protection, child victims are often punished, with 2,496 children deprived of liberty for their actual or alleged association with parties to conflict in 2022.

The climate crisis is putting [one billion children](#) in peril – corresponding to almost one out of every two children worldwide¹⁷. Children are disproportionately affected by resulting water and food scarcity, diseases, and extreme weather events. The reason for this is that they are more vulnerable than adults due to their developing physiology – for example, children need more food and water than adults, relative to their bodyweight, and are more prone to illnesses and extreme weather impacts like droughts and storms. Infants and young children are less able to regulate their body temperature and more prone to dehydration, making them more vulnerable during extreme heatwaves.¹⁸ Children in the most affected countries may lack access to life-saving, essential services including healthcare, clean water, and education, with adverse impacts on

their development that drive up child mortality, and for others, risk holding them back throughout their lives.¹⁹ Climate related crises also harm children's mental health, causing anxiety and depression during fragile phases of their psychological development.

The rise of digital platforms and their use has exposed children to new risks, notably cyberbullying, online predators, and exploitation. For example, on average, children aged 8-12 in the United States spend 4-6 hours a day watching or using screens, and teens spend up to 9 hours.²⁰ Increased internet use by children has contributed to a rise in online child sexual abuse and grooming, as the anonymity of the internet and increased screen time have made it easier to exploit children.²¹ They are particularly targeted via social media platforms, and their increased use of such platforms can further be linked to a growing mental health crisis.²² At the same time, the digital divide has proved persistent, and an estimated two thirds of the world's school-age children – or 1.3 billion children aged 3 to 17 years old – do not have internet connection in their homes.²³

ADDRESS SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES AND DISCRIMINATION TO LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND

Systemic inequalities and discrimination are pervasive issues in both developed and developing countries, curtailing children's access to their rights, including to education, healthcare, and even identity. These deep-rooted barriers also affect adults, limiting their ability to secure employment, receive equal pay, or freely express themselves due to factors like gender, race, religion, or sexuality.²⁴ To fulfill the pledge to "leave no one behind," addressing discrimination and inequality must be central to 2030 efforts, with the priority on reaching the most vulnerable children first. A key strategy in this effort is investing in child rights-based, inclusive social protection, which has proved effective not only to combat poverty and inequality but also to support the development of strong, resilient societies and economies.²⁵

ENGAGE CHILDREN MEANINGFULLY IN PROCESSES AND DECISIONS AFFECTING THEM

Building a better future requires scaling up children's participation in decisions affecting them. Children envision a world where they can actively contribute to decision-making, but face significant barriers in being part of decisions that affect them. Often, they are not seen as independent rights-holders or civic actors, with their voices overlooked by families, communities, and policymakers. This disregard is further entrenched when children are excluded from their government's laws and policies. Children further identify a lack of awareness about human rights as a major obstacle to recognition and respect for their rights.²⁶ Greater efforts are needed to raise human rights awareness in communities, especially in schools and marginalized areas, ensuring children are meaningfully engaged in decisions and that information on their rights is accessible to all.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

GOAL 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Strengthened investment is essential to uphold children's right to health, and health services must be made available for free at the point of use, particularly for the most marginalized children and their families. While many countries have national nutrition policies and targets, financing remains a central challenge to implementation.

Early childhood is a critical period for shaping a child's development, with 80% of brain growth occurring in the first 3 years.²⁷ Investments in children's rights and well-being during this time have lifelong benefits, impacting future health, learning, and overall well-being. Essential elements for a child's thriving include health care, nutrition, clean water, protection, security, early learning opportunities, play, and responsive caregiving.²⁸ Early childhood development programs, especially for marginalized children, can reduce inequalities and break cycles of poverty from repeating for future generations.²⁹ In humanitarian and fragile settings, these services can be life-saving, as children face barriers to basic needs and are at high risk for trauma and long-term mental health issues.

Special measures are needed to guarantee children's sexual and reproductive health and rights, including comprehensive sexuality education and the continuity of age-responsive sexual and reproductive health services to ensure children can make informed choices about their bodies, free from discrimination, coercion or violence.³⁰

GOAL 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and essential for the enjoyment of children's rights. Yet it remains a significant barrier to children's rights, especially for girls who face double discrimination. Despite progress in education and health outcomes for women and girls, harmful social norms in many regions perpetuate early childbearing and cycles of poverty.

Gender-based violence disproportionately impacts girls. Addressing the root causes of gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and power imbalances is critical, and empowering women and girls requires the active involvement of men and boys in challenging discriminatory gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. At the same time, improving access to comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents, is essential.³¹ In addition, stronger national laws and programs are urgently needed to address child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence, including setting the minimum marriage age at 18 for both girls and boys, banning female genital mutilation (FGM), and prohibiting its medicalization.³²

GOAL 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

SDG target 8.7 aims to end child labor by 2030, including eliminating the worst forms, such as child soldiers and forced labor. Despite slow progress, ongoing crises, poverty, and conflict

threaten to reverse advancements, highlighting the need for holistic approaches to address its root causes and protect children who are vulnerable to child labor.

Today millions of children remain in hazardous and forced labor, depriving them of education, health, and future opportunities. Nearly one in ten children are affected worldwide, including as many as one in five children in Africa.³³ Economic inequalities, poverty, and environmental shocks continue to drive the persistence of child labor. The most harmful forms include sexual exploitation, violence, and slavery, and have severe physical and mental impacts, while the recruitment of child soldiers exposes children to extreme violence and long-term trauma. Efforts to eradicate child labor should involve stronger national laws, and comprehensive programs addressing poverty, harmful social norms and gender inequality, and access to education.

GOAL 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

SDG aims under Goal 14 are closely linked to climate change and broader efforts to uphold the right to a healthy environment by addressing the impacts of environmental degradation, such as ocean acidification and biodiversity loss, which directly threaten ecosystems, livelihoods, and the well-being of today's children and future generations.

The climate crisis is threatening children's rights and well-being, driving child poverty and environmental degradation. The effects of climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately impact children, particularly those from marginalized communities, due to their sensitive phase of physical and cognitive development. For example, children are more vulnerable to harmful pollutants, with approximately two billion children living in areas with toxic air. Exposure to contaminated water, food, and air results in health issues, including developmental delays and lifelong diseases. Further, increased extreme weather events like storms, droughts, and floods exacerbate existing inequalities, putting children's rights to life, health, and survival at risk.³⁴

Children around the world have expressed growing concerns about climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, which directly affect their rights to survival, education, play, and an adequate standard of living. Despite increased awareness of the risks, children are often unable to fully exercise their rights to information, participation, and access to remedies regarding environmental issues.³⁵ Strengthened action is urgently needed to uphold children's rights to a healthy environment, and their participation in climate related decision-making should be supported at all levels. States and businesses must address environmental impacts on children with rights-based climate action to protect both children's future and the planet, alongside pollution mitigation, and safe disposal of hazardous waste.

GOAL 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires scaled up financial investment, with an estimated additional \$30 trillion needed by 2030. To support developing countries, an

annual SDG Stimulus of \$500 billion in affordable, long-term finance has been identified as being essential.³⁶ Financing approaches must prioritize investments in vulnerable children and apply a child rights approach to public budgeting and monitoring. Universal social protection that respects children's rights can be achieved through policy shifts, international solidarity, and political will that is backed by scaled up budgets.³⁷

Financial transparency and accountability in investments directed at children are crucial, with an emphasis on domestic resource mobilization, progressive taxes, and anti-corruption measures. States should ensure transparent public finance systems with clear budget lines for children's spending and empower children to participate in monitoring. Integrating children's rights into economic decision-making can help to address the root causes of inequality and injustice, ensuring better outcomes for children and the planet.

ACTIONS BEING UNDERTAKEN BY UN HUMAN RIGHTS TO SUPPORT CHILD RIGHTS-BASED IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA

The UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) is integrating human rights into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to support inclusion and the respect for all people's dignity and rights. The SDGs align with international human rights law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. OHCHR collaborates with states, UN entities, and civil society to promote human rights-based, inclusive approaches to SDG implementation. For example, OHCHR hosts the [Universal Human Rights Index](#), a practical tool compiling all recommendations issued by human rights mechanisms in each country and showing their complementarity with SDGs.

In 2024, OHCHR established the Innovation & Analytics Hub, leveraging digital tools and data analytics to support human rights-based sustainable development. OHCHR also plays a key role in monitoring Goal 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), linked to children's protection from violence. With over 100 locations, OHCHR supports human rights components in nine UN peace missions worldwide. In this context the office monitors child rights violations and advocates for accountability, in particular by documenting the impacts of conflicts on children.

The 2023 [Guidance Note of the Secretary General on Child Rights Mainstreaming](#) emphasizes that children's rights must be integrated across all UN work and prioritized within the 2030 Agenda. OHCHR, alongside UNICEF, is co-leading the implementation of this Guidance Note, notably by supporting its integration across the work of United Nations entities via an inter-agency task team. OHCHR is also leading initiatives to realize children's right to be heard, and is actively involving children's participation across its work, as well as that of the treaty bodies and the Human Rights Council. For example, a 2023 OHCHR global survey involving nearly 4,000 children highlighted the struggles they are facing around the world due (*inter alia*) poverty, economic insecurity, inadequate housing, hunger, and lack of clean water.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In these challenging times, strengthened cooperation is essential to defend children's rights worldwide and reverse their erosion. The global pushback against rights highlights the collective responsibility to reaffirm that children's rights are non-negotiable and must be upheld. International solidarity and multilateralism are key to overcoming the narrow interests that undermine children's rights, and the human rights pillar of the United Nations serves as a vital framework during crises as a mechanism for accountability, prevention, and safeguarding. Responding to the [Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights](#) is critical, alongside implementation of the [Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on Child Rights Mainstreaming](#), which emphasizes that children's rights must be integrated across all UN work and prioritized within the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, children must be included in decision-making to enhance accountability and uphold their right to participate. Empowering children as agents of change for sustainable development requires creating safe spaces for their participation, both online and offline.

Commitments under the Convention on the Rights of the Child must be upheld through increased investment in children's rights and development from the earliest years, particularly for children who are the most vulnerable. Prioritizing investments in children's health, education, and protection from violence is critical, backed by budgets that reflect children's rights and best interests. Investing in children's health, education, and social protection should be a primary focus, mobilizing the maximum available resources for children's rights and needs. Budgetary allocations in favor of children's rights can be ensured by robust monitoring systems and participatory budgeting at the national level. At the global level, economic governance needs to be based on the overall aim of bringing about a more equitable international financial architecture, and adequate financing for development.

A child's right to live with dignity should not depend on who they are or the circumstances into which they were born. As children suffer disproportionately in crises it is critical that policies and actions to address climate change, conflict, poverty, and the digital realm have a core focus on children, and particularly those who are the most at risk of exclusion. 'Business as usual' is not working: states, businesses and all stakeholders must step up efforts to make the shifts required to fulfil children's right to a healthy environment, and to protect them from the impacts of ongoing environmental degradation. Efforts to bridge the digital divide should be expanded, ensuring that all children can access the benefits of technology; at the same time the governance of the digital realm and children's protection from related risks urgently need to be strengthened.

Reliable, disaggregated data is crucial to track the situation for children in specific countries and circumstances, and birth registration and legal identity for every child serve as the foundation, particularly for children who are marginalized or in vulnerable situations. Expanded cooperation and investment is needed at all levels to step up efforts to protect and fulfil children's rights, so that both present and future generations can survive and thrive.

¹ See [A/HRC/RES/37/20](#)

² According to data from the UN Population Division (as of 2023), children under 18 years old account for about 30% of the global population: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

³ See <https://ceh.unicef.org/>

⁴ See, for example, <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/children%E2%80%99s-rights-jeopardy-34-years-after-landmark-un-treaty>

⁵ 1 in 3 young people aged 13-18 have reported experiencing some form of online harm, including cyberbullying and online sexual harassment. See: <https://www.unicef.org/kyrgyzstan/press-releases/unicef-80-cent-youth-world-recognize-internet-can-be-danger#:~:text=%E2%80%9CToday%2C%20globally%201%20in%203,information%2C%20educational%20resources%20and%20more>

⁶ UNICEF, 2023, "The State of the World's Children 2023: Children, Climate and Change."

⁷ UNICEF, 2023, "The State of the World's Children 2023: Children, Climate and Change"

⁸ UNICEF, "The State of the World's Children 2022: Children in a Digital World," UNICEF, 2022.

⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/media/163276/file/ECD%20Brochure%20%28English%20Language%29.pdf>

¹⁰ UNESCO, 2021, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2021"

¹¹ According to the World Health Organization: *'Globally, it is estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in the past year'*

See: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>

¹² <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-violence-against-children-widespread-affecting-millions-globally> ; See also: <https://www.unicef.org/kyrgyzstan/press-releases/child-suffer-violent-methods-upbringing>

¹³ See <https://www.unicef.org/kyrgyzstan/press-releases/child-suffer-violent-methods-upbringing>; and SRSG-VAC report, 2023. A/HRC/55/58

¹⁴ UNICEF, 2023, "The State of the World's Children 2023: Children, Climate and Change."

¹⁵ See: <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development-emergencies>

¹⁶ See: <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15745.doc.htm>

¹⁷ See: <https://www.unicef.ch/en/aktuell/blog/2023-08-25/die-fuenf-gefaerlichsten-klimabedrohungen-fuer-Kinder>

¹⁸ See: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-changed-child>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx

²¹ INTERPOL, 2021. Child Exploitation and Cybercrime: The Growing Threat of Online Abuse. Available at: <https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Crimes-against-children>

²² See: <https://capmh.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13034-023-00597-9> ; <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/social-media-potential-harm-to-children/>; See also <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/10/07/social-media-mental-health-suicide-crisis-teens>

²³ Joint report from UNICEF and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU): [Two thirds of the world's school-age children have no internet access at home, new UNICEF-ITU report says](#)

²⁴ OHCHR, 2024. Contribution by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the 2024 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: Inputs from a Child Rights Perspective.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ OHCHR and Child Rights Connect, 2023. Children's Vision for Human Rights.

²⁷ <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2023-new-report-calls-for-greater-attention-to-children-s-vital-first-years#:~:text=Launched%20today%20by%20the%20World,to%20improve%20lifelong%20health%2C%20nutrition>

²⁸ <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>

²⁹ See for example <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education>

³⁰ OHCHR, 2021. Child Rights Input to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (Submission from Plan international).

³¹ Ibid

³² OHCHR, 2022. Child Rights Input to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

³³ See: <https://www.alliance87.org/interactive/child-labour-stats/> and <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/au-ilo-and-unicef-mark-world-day-against-child-labour-africa>

³⁴ OHCHR, 2022. Child Rights Input to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

³⁵ OHCHR and Child Rights Connect, 2023. Children's Vision for Human Rights.

³⁶ OHCHR, 2024. Contribution by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the 2024 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: Inputs from a Child Rights Perspective.

³⁷ Ibid