

Investing in child protection and wellbeing: **A key accelerator of the SDGs**



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OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON

**VIOLENCE
AGAINST
CHILDREN**



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON

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I Introduction

With less than six years remaining to achieve the 2030 Agenda, the world remains off track on most SDG targets, including the commitment to end all forms of violence against children. Despite ongoing efforts, violence against children remains widespread and is exacerbated by multifaceted and overlapping crises. To end violence against children, urgent, coordinated action from all sectors is needed to address these challenges and protect the rights of every child.

2024 was a pivotal year in the global fight to end violence against children. This was highlighted by global efforts to mobilize all stakeholders, re-energize commitments, strengthen multilateralism, and foster sustainable, context-specific partnerships. Key milestones included the first-ever Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence against Children, held in Bogotá, Colombia in November, which built on vibrant national, regional and global multi-stakeholder preparatory processes. The launch of the revitalized Pathfinding Global Alliance to End Violence against Children at the Ministerial Conference is expected to generate more robust actions and results to ensure children's protection.

In addition to these global efforts, 2024 marked 15 years of dedicated advocacy for the protection and well-being of children under the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (SRSG-VAC). This anniversary underscores the importance of continued collaboration as we work towards a world where every child is safe and protected.

This strong and growing momentum for children's protection needs to continue. It needs to build on the achievements made so far, assess common barriers, and accelerate actions to fulfil the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I hope that this brief provides a tool for Member States that are preparing for the next cycle of their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR). This process builds on the existing engagement of States in, for example, the reporting processes on their implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Periodic Review, and national and regional follow-up to the Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence against Children.

I remain committed to acting as a bridge and a catalyst to support these efforts.



Najat Maalla M'jid

Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children

This Brief

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (SRSG-VAC) reached out to all 36 Member States¹ that presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the 2024 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) to offer guidance and support to their reporting processes. This was followed by briefings, where appropriate, to the United Nations Resident Coordinators, United Nations Country Teams, and United Nations Regional Offices. Following these engagements, her Office conducted a thorough study of the 2024 VNR processes and reports, as well as the live presentations that had been made during the 2024 HLPF.

This brief shares reflections from the SRSG's engagements with Member States, including country visits, interactions during the preparation of their VNRs, bilateral meetings during the HLPF and other high-level UN meetings.

This year, these reflections focus on the cross-sectoral approaches taken by Member States. They highlight how investment in a holistic approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contributes to the prevention and response to violence against children, and how addressing violence against children supports progress towards these goals.

Through the sharing of this advocacy brief, Member States are encouraged to use the VNR process as an opportunity to highlight examples of promising practices, and to build a roadmap for ending violence against children. These roadmaps should address its root causes and responses as part of national and territorial development plans.

Ending violence against children will accelerate the achievement of SDGs and makes economic sense



The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is deeply interconnected with children's well-being: the two reinforce each other. Violence against children is driven by factors such as poverty, lack of education, gender inequality, and discrimination, and is exacerbated by crises like conflict and climate change.

Addressing these challenges through the SDGs will create **a child- and gender-sensitive protective system**. The cross-sectoral nature of children's protection means that measures to prevent violence and promote well-being not only safeguard children but also accelerate progress toward the SDGs. The creation of such a system requires accountable institutions and integrated services that are accessible to all children and their caregivers – and doing so makes economic sense.

In addition to the human cost of violence against children, the financial cost to national economies is immense.² Studies show that the direct and indirect cost of violence against children can be up to 11% of national GDP. In addition, the annual costs of violence against children can be up to six times higher than the annual government expenditure on health.

There are two main economic benefits of investing in child protection and well-being. First, the vast costs linked to the consequences of violence will be eliminated, allowing governments to use these funds more productively elsewhere. And second, effective prevention will raise the overall stock of human capital and lead to more inclusive economic growth.

More countries are now investing in children's protection and well-being. They are paying more attention to the need for cross-sectoral services for children, defining the package of services needed for children's protection and well-being, assessing the cost of inaction, conducting studies on violence against children, and allocating additional resources. Member States are also coming together to further build localized solutions. All are positive examples of the elements needed for a child- and gender-sensitive protective system; they now need to be brought to scale, leaving no child behind.

I Now is the time for a child-and gender-sensitive protection system



Building a child- and gender-sensitive protection system requires **political commitment** at the highest levels. Placing child protection and well-being at the heart of every government's agenda and their efforts to achieve the SDGs would make it possible to **allocate and invest** adequate financial and human resources. This is essential for the effective implementation of existing laws, policies and plans for child protection, not only at the national level but also at the provincial and local levels.

In a growing number of countries, this political commitment is being translated into an integrated budget and planning framework, bringing crucial sectors together, such as education, health, justice, planning and finance.

When the building blocks of child-and-gender sensitive protection come together, they form a cross-sectoral protection system – a chain of services surrounding ALL children like a protective shield. There are many good examples of action by states, and they should be highlighted in the VNR reporting.

The examples of cross-sectoral approaches taken by Member States confirm the importance of such linkages. However, while these examples are delivering results for children, they share one challenge – they need to be scaled up to reach more children in more places.

An increasing number of governments are **assessing the cost of violence against children**, as well as the **cost of implementing integrated services**, while others are examining the **return on investment in the social workforce** and taking steps to **integrate children's rights and well-being into public finance and budgeting frameworks**.

More countries are adopting the expanded notion of **social protection**³ to support families to care for and protect children. Examples include **empowering families** with a continuum of cash, care and protection services to support their capacity, such as the economic empowerment of women and the prevention of unnecessary family separation, while promoting alternatives to institutionalization such as foster care, kinship care and community-based support systems.

There is greater investment in multi-sectoral **mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS)** for children, particularly those at risk and in vulnerable situations. More countries are taking action to ensure that MHPSS are safe, dignified and participatory, and administered in a way that is community-owned and culturally appropriate. Recognising the link between violence reduction and access to **comprehensive health services**, including sexual and reproductive health services for children, youth and women, States are, for example, adopting comprehensive sexual education in national curricula and building more health service centres.

Birth registration and documentation, which has a dedicated SDG target⁴, is the recognition of a child's legal existence and identity and a prerequisite to their ability to exercise their right to access services. Efforts are being made to ensure documentation for all children through various programmes, such as online systems and mobile offices to reach remote areas, and by waiving registration fees. Countries are also taking action to end statelessness, prevent the detention of children on the move, and ensure the protection and rights of these children.

More countries are adopting **integrated case management systems** with early warning, detection, and timely referral to multidisciplinary services. 'One-stop' service centres are being created to bring various aspects of protection, including social protection, medical care, counselling and justice services together under one roof.

Countries are also taking action to ensure that detention and deprivation of liberty is the last resort for child offenders. **Alternatives to detention and access to services**, as well as rehabilitation and resocialization, are being prioritized. Child-friendly courts are being established and judges and lawyers are being trained in child rights and the elements of a child-friendly justice system. For child survivors of violence who come into contact with the justice system, 'one-stop' service centres are also effective in avoiding secondary victimization and ensuring access to child-friendly justice.

The creation of a **safe and non-violent school environment** has a specific SDG target⁵. Guidelines and standard operating procedures to respond to violence in schools are being established. Child protection policies in schools, including in settings for remote learning, are being implemented. Bullying prevention and other programmes that focus on peer violence are also proving effective in a number of countries.

The **Internet** offers many opportunities for children, including a space for learning. At the same time, the digital world can also put children at risk of exploitation and abuse, which harms their health (including mental health), education and development. Universal access to the Internet, which has a specific SDG target⁶, must come with measures to ensure the safety of every child who is online. Countries are taking action to tackle violence against children in the digital space, including cyberbullying. These efforts include national model responses to address child sexual exploitation and abuse online, age verification measures to limit children's access to age-inappropriate and harmful content, and programmes to support and empower parents and teachers in protecting children from online risks. Programmes are also being carried out to strengthen children's online literacy. **The Global Digital Compact** adopted at the United Nations Summit of the Future in 2024 as part of the Pact for the Future commits governments to upholding international law and human rights online and to taking concrete steps to make the digital space safe and secure. The Compact specifically addresses Member States working with the tech industry. In this area, the Tech Coalition⁷ is implementing a series of coordinated actions to drive the efforts of the technology industry to fight child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) online.

More **community-based programmes** are being implemented, and are mobilizing various stakeholders, including community leaders, educators and caregivers. Programmes such as community volunteers provide support to parents and help to harness community capacity for child protection.

Leveraging their moral and cultural authority, **religious and traditional leaders** are taking action to prevent and address child marriage, female genital mutilation, child labour and corporal punishment. Religious leaders are coming together to collaborate across faith traditions, building a network of religious communities, and are advocating and working together for the well-being of children. Tribal leaders are banning child marriage and helping survivors return to school, while faith-based organizations are leading innovative efforts to raise child safeguarding standards in churches and communities, engaging children, adapting messaging and ensuring community ownership of the process.

More children are gaining access to **safe pathways for participation** at the global, regional, national and local levels. At the global level, for example, children from various backgrounds participated in global conferences such as the Summit of the Future in September 2024 and the Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence against Children in November 2024, and many more taking part in its preparatory processes alongside government and civil society representatives. They raised awareness about the challenges they face and demanded stronger actions to protect their rights and to end violence against them. At the national level, more countries are adopting legislation to support children's participation in decision-making processes⁸ and civic engagement. A number of countries have established sustainable platforms for children's participation, such as children's parliaments and councils, where children can discuss the issues that concern them. In addition, the VNRs of about 20 countries each year include information on how children participated in the VNR process, through activities such as focus group discussions and surveys.



I Member States are coming together to end violence against children

More than 110 countries made pledges at the Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence against Children in Bogotá, Colombia (7-8 November), marking a pivotal moment for the transformation of commitment into action. In addition, the revitalized **Pathfinding Global Alliance on Ending Violence against Children** was launched at the Conference by over 40 Member States. This momentum must be maintained and can be further leveraged to scale up actions. The Global Alliance, for example, offers a strong platform for sustained engagement among like-minded Member States. For Pathfinding countries, the upcoming VNRs present a crucial opportunity to highlight their progress and accelerate collective action.

The Special Representative on Violence against Children, through her engagements with Member States and the Pathfinding Global Alliance, will continue to support and connect Member States, facilitate peer learning and expand a community of practice to foster context-specific and mutually supportive partnerships.

The Special Representative will continue her engagement with the UN Resident Coordinators and the UN Country Teams to mobilize system-wide UN action for children and to ensure that the full spectrum of child rights, including their right to protection from violence, becomes an integral part of all United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.⁹

The **Pathfinding Global Alliance on Ending Violence against Children** aims to strengthen country engagement, cultivate closer connections to local realities through a bottom-up, multi-stakeholder approach, and boost peer engagement and the sharing of promising practices. Since the launch of the Global Alliance in November 2024, a growing number of States have formally expressed their interest in becoming members. All relevant information on promising and positive examples of measures to end violence against children will be made available through the OSRSG-VAC's Online Knowledge Sharing Market, which is currently under development.

Endnotes

1. Of these Member States, 12 were part of the Pathfinding Global Alliance at the time of the engagement during the VNR Process, and others expressed interests in becoming Pathfinders following their engagement with the SRSG-VAC.
2. For more information on investment case, read “Building the investment Case for Ending Violence Against Children” <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/building-investment-case-ending-violence-against-children>
3. A package of care that encompasses social protection and assistance, including cash transfers, social insurance, universal health care and other policies and programmes.
4. SDG Target 16.9: Provide a legal identity for all, including birth registration.
5. SDG Target 4.a: build and upgrade education facilities that are child-, disability- and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.
6. SDG Target 9c: Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet.
7. <https://www.technologycoalition.org/>
8. SDG Target 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive and representative decision-making.
9. SG Guidance Note on Child Rights Mainstreaming: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Guidance-Note-Secretary-General-Child-Rights-Mainstreaming-July-2023.pdf>.



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