



DECade of >>> ACTION

Seeing the
Sustainable Development Goals
and
Voluntary National Reviews
through a Child Protection Lens

2022



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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Contents

Introduction	4
Keeping the promise: ending violence against children by 2030	5
Seeing the SDGs through a Child Protection Lens	7
How the SDGs strengthen the protection of children and reduce the risk of violence	9
Voluntary National Reviews 2022: Key reflections	12

Introduction

All 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) touch the lives of children. This means that realizing the rights of children, including their right to protection from violence, requires a holistic and integrated approach to development. More than half of the world's children suffer some form of violence each year. The socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with ongoing complex humanitarian crises have made this appalling situation even worse.

More children than ever face extreme poverty, discrimination and social exclusion. Nearly 1 billion children lived in poverty before the pandemic, a figure that is now 10% higher.¹ Poverty increases children's vulnerability to violence in all its forms, including child labour, sexual violence, child marriage, trafficking and recruitment into criminal gangs and armed groups. More children than ever have also been forcibly displaced, fleeing conflict, violence, climate change and natural disasters, as well as food insecurity. Nearly 37 million children were displaced within or outside their countries in 2021 – the highest number since the end of the Second World War.²

All too often, children who are victims of violence lack access to essential services such as social protection, health and psychosocial support, education, child protection and justice. The challenges presented by violence against children affect the whole world. No country is exempt, and no child is immune. We need to shift the development paradigm toward a child- and gender-sensitive, integrated approach that recognizes the interlinkages between the SDGs and children's rights as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Violence prevention makes economic sense. Greater investment in child- and gender-sensitive, cross-sectoral violence prevention and protection systems and services that encompass child protection, birth registration/documentation, education, health, justice, and social protection, will bring huge economic returns. Investing in children also means involving them as part of the solution. Their voices need to be heard and acted upon; their initiatives shared and supported.

Since 2020, I have engaged with Member States during their preparations for the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), aiming to mainstream the protection of children and of their rights, as recommended by the Call to Action for Human Rights³ and Our Common Agenda.⁴ I strongly commend Member States that have included children's rights and violence prevention in their SDG implementation and monitoring processes, such as the VNRs, and encourage others to do so. We have less than seven years to fulfil the promises made to children in the 2030 Agenda and time is running out. We must invest more in children – and quickly – as the present and future generations.



Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children

1. Child poverty | UNICEF
2. Nearly 37 million children displaced worldwide – highest number ever recorded (unicef.org)
3. Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights (un.org)
4. Our Common Agenda | United Nations

Keeping the promise: ending violence against children by 2030

Less than seven years remain to meet the SDGs by 2030 and keep the promise to end all forms of violence against children. In their 2022 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), Member States reported on progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and on reaching the 17 SDGs. They discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic and other ongoing humanitarian crises – conflicts, the climate crisis, social instability, food insecurity, massive internal and external displacement, and growing mistrust in institutions – have intensified children’s vulnerability to violence.

Implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the process of ‘Building Back Better’ beyond the pandemic mean that these interlocking crises must be addressed holistically with people – particularly children – at the centre.

While the VNRs from 2022 show strong political commitment to children’s well-being, they also highlight ongoing challenges. These include inadequate financial and technical resources, and a lack of disaggregated data to help monitor progress and bring promising practices to scale. The achievement of the SDGs requires a **child- and gender-sensitive approach to development** that is cross-sectoral and coordinated. This is recognized by Member States in their VNRs, with many of their references to the protection of children from violence, social protection, and equality cross referenced to their reporting on SDG 5 on gender equality.

Integrated, child- and gender-sensitive, cross-sectoral systems need to be brought to scale and made accessible to all, leaving no one behind. They include social welfare, protection, and care services; birth registration and documentation; safe, inclusive and empowering education that encompasses safe and inclusive digital learning; physical, mental and sexual and reproductive health services; justice; and parenting support and sustainable social protection for vulnerable families and communities.

Decision-making processes need to be more inclusive, participatory and representative. Children are already key actors and will become the parents and caregivers of future generations. They need to be engaged in national and local development planning and integrated into decision-making processes.

Partnerships need to be context specific, results-oriented and mutually reinforcing to bring about successful development. International cooperation needs to move from a donor-driven approach to inclusive partnerships that foster south-south, north-south and triangular collaboration.

Why this matters?

Violence has a huge impact on children's physical and mental well-being and the consequences can last a lifetime. In addition to the unconscionable human suffering, a huge financial toll is paid by its victims and societies.

Exposure to violence, stress, exclusion and crises causes immediate and long-term physiological and psychological damage. Violence against children also has economic costs that have been estimated to be equivalent to as much as 8% of global GDP.⁵

Increased investment in children from an early age and through to adulthood is vital for resilient and sustainable social, human and economic growth, and provides a high social and economic return.

Building blocks of a child- and gender-sensitive protection system

Eliminating violence against children increases the human capital of a nation. High returns on investment in violence prevention make economic sense and help to build trust in government institutions. Building an effective protection system needs not only investment but also strong social mobilization across all of society, including children, families and caregivers, communities, religious and faith leaders, media and the private sector. In countries where the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework is relevant, cross sectoral plans that include the following services should be considered:

- Sustainable social protection
- Birth registration and documentation
- Safe and inclusive education, including digital learning
- Health services, including mental health and sexual and reproductive health
- Parenting and family support, including positive and non-violent discipline
- Justice systems that encompass social, climate, penal, civil and administrative justice
- Efficient child protection case management systems that include early warning and early detection mechanisms
- The strengthening of protective social norms through the empowerment of local communities, including religious and faith communities.

5. The costs and economic impact of violence against children | ODI: Think change.

Seeing the SDGs through a Child Protection Lens

All 17 SDGs touch the lives of children in one way or another. While some forms of violence against children have specific SDG targets, the 2030 Agenda also encompasses a much broader set of factors that may put children at risk of violence or help to protect them from it. The achievement of the SDGs will help to prevent violence in children's lives and provide effective responses to its victims.

At the same time, social and climate justice, equality, equity, and economic progress across the whole of the 2030 Agenda will be hindered by the pernicious and long-term effects of violence against children if the specific SDG targets on violence against children and its drivers are not met.

CREATING A SAFE, HEALTHY, INCLUSIVE AND EMPOWERING ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL CHILDREN!



SDG Targets that directly address violence against children

4.a safe and non-violent environment for education	5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation	5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation	16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere	8.7 Eliminate all forms of child labour	16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children	

How the SDGs strengthen the protection of children and reduce the risk of violence

There are many factors that drive violence against children, such as poverty, lack of access to education, gender inequality, discrimination, weak social protection systems, social norms that condone violence, and the aftermath of humanitarian and natural disasters, including those caused by armed conflicts and climate change. The essence of the 2030 Agenda – to create peaceful, prosperous, inclusive and just societies – envisages a world where the drivers of violence are proactively reduced, strengthening the protection of children, and reducing risks.

The VNR process is a key opportunity to mainstream children's rights in a way that considers the integrated and interlinked nature of the SDGs, with the SDGs themselves reflecting the indivisible and interdependent nature of children's rights.

The 2030 Agenda provides a crucial framework for the building of an inclusive, just, enabling, healthy and safe environment and the full realization of children's rights as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Its review process, therefore, needs to be based on an integrated and child rights-based approach that identifies the links, intersections and cross-cutting elements among the SDGs.

All 17 SDGs relate in some way to the risk and protective factors that drive violence against children. The following examples illustrate how the achievement of the SDGs can address violence and how ending violence against children can, in turn, accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Risks, Drivers and Protective Factors



RISKS OF VARIOUS FORMS OF VIOLENCE AND IMPACTS



Child
marriage



Child
pregnancy



Bullying



Corporal
punishment



Child
trafficking



Child
labour



Violence
online



DRIVERS

Poverty



Health



Education and early childhood development



Decent work



Safe, clean and connected living environment



PROTECTIVE FACTORS



Social protection supports children and their families



Access to health care and health personnel helps detection, prevention and response to violence



Access to education helps strengthen child protection. Quality education creates more productive, equal, and inclusive societies



Decent work allows families and caregivers to provide for the health, development and protection of children



Safe and affordable ICT enhances children's learning, increases opportunities for social contact and accessing protection services



RISKS OF VARIOUS FORMS OF VIOLENCE AND IMPACTS

Forced displacement



Child trafficking



Child marriage



Stateless children



Recruitment into gangs and armed groups



Children injured and killed in violence



Children deprived of liberty



DRIVERS

Climate action



PROTECTIVE FACTORS



Mitigating climate crisis reduces associated risks of violence

Children on the move



Orderly, safe, and regular migration policies mitigate risks to children and their caregivers

Gender equality and discrimination



Equitable access to health, education and protection services enhances development of societies

Peaceful, just, and inclusive societies



Birth registration ensures access to social protection, justice and social services

Participatory decision making process



Children's participation enhances the prevention of, and response to, violence

Voluntary National Reviews 2022: Key reflections

The VNR process is an opportunity to mainstream children's rights

The 2030 Agenda provides a crucial framework for the realization of the rights of children by building an inclusive, just, enabling, healthy and safe environment. Therefore, any review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda needs an integrated and child rights-based approach that identifies the links, intersections and cross-cutting elements among the SDGs. The 2022 High-level Political Forum (HLPF) focused on 'Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.'

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (SRSG-VAC) reached out to all 44 Member States presenting VNRs at the 2022 HLPF to offer support to their national reporting processes. During this engagement, the SRSG was greatly encouraged by the commitment expressed by Member States to the protection and well-being of children. At the invitation of these Member States, the SRSG participated in regional and national policy dialogues, jointly hosted activities at the high-level moments of the HLPF and General Assembly, and joined national VNR preparation processes. In addition, her country visits to Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Greece, Jordan and Viet Nam coincided with the preparation or immediate follow up to their VNR process.

The SRSG followed all her engagements with Member States with briefings to the relevant United Nations Resident Coordinators and Country Teams, as well as UN regional offices. She urged appropriate national follow-up using the One UN approach, in line with the Call for Action and Our Common Agenda. She also stressed the interlinkages across the 2030 Agenda implementation and review process, the periodic reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.

In this regard, 14 Member States with VNRs in 2022 had also completed a UPR within the previous two years. A review of the UPR recommendation matrices shows that two of the areas cited most frequently in relation to children were 'Children, Definition, General Principles' and 'Protection and Violence against Women', signalling the intersectionality of these two issues. The 2022 VNRs reported progress and actions that were clearly linked to recommendations from the UPR and other international human rights mechanisms, notably the CRC and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The SRSG also noted that the One UN approach should be used to avoid duplication of the efforts required of Member States in international reporting processes. Agreed guides and tools linked to the SDGs, Our Common Agenda, the Call to Action for Human Rights, and the New Urban Agenda are available and complement international review and monitoring mechanisms such as the VNRs, UPRs, and State Party reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. In the context of the VNRs, all tools and reporting should ensure ‘ownership’ of the SDGs and the reporting process by all national stakeholders, including children.

How violence against children is addressed in the VNRs

In her engagement with Member States in the lead-up to the HLPF, the SRSG focused in particular on how their 2022 VNRs could report on progress towards ending violence against children and its drivers, and how this progress helps to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The following examples from the 2022 VNRs illustrate how addressing drivers can mitigate impacts of violence against children. These examples are not exhaustive, but they highlight promising practices and aim to encourage others to take action to address similar challenges.

Poverty



“Leaders of the world: the next time you lockdown the world, please put aside just a little bit of money to help families who can no longer help themselves.” Cute, 16, Zimbabwe, Joining Forces, ‘Covid-19 pandemic and my rights!’

While poverty itself is not a direct cause of violence, extreme poverty can contribute to human rights violations. Poverty can create stresses on families, caregivers and communities that exacerbate the risk of violence, abuse and exploitation of children, such as child and forced marriage, child labour, trafficking, smuggling and recruitment into criminal gangs. Children whose basic needs are not being met are often left vulnerable to the perpetrators of violence.

Most VNRs discussed the importance of social protection, such as child allowances and food assistance for families with children. Many also discussed the increased need for social protection and safety nets in the context of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than half of Member States discussed cash assistance programmes such as child allowances and cash transfers as part of their social protection strategies. Several discussed universal health coverage or affordable health care services for vulnerable populations including children

and pregnant women. A number of Member States, including Equatorial Guinea, Greece, Malawi and Mali, discussed a more holistic and cross-sectoral system for the protection of children, encompassing services related to health, education, housing, childcare and access to food.

In the process of engaging with Member States, the SRSG-VAC welcomes the trend in various countries to provide integrated packages of cash, care, protection, nutrition and case management services to reach the most vulnerable children and their caregivers. The SRSG-VAC hopes to see these approaches brought to scale.

Health



“A lot of children and my friends have been mentally, psychologically, emotionally and socially distressed. I have really tried my best to help in the little way I can.” Girl, 10, Nigeria #CovidUnder19, global consultation

Violence impedes children’s physical and mental health and development. Exposure to violence is often traumatic, and can provoke toxic responses to stress that cause both immediate and long-term physiological and psychological damage. Lack of access to health care services, including mental health and sexual and reproductive health, has a direct impact on children’s wellbeing. In addition, health systems and their personnel play a key role in the detection, prevention, and response to violence against children.

Most reports discussed affordable and accessible health care services for all, including universal health coverage. At least 12 Member States discussed the issue of children’s mental health in their VNRs, aiming to meet increased demands for mental health and psychosocial support services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing challenges, including Belarus, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Greece, Jamaica, Latvia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Sri Lanka and the United Arab Emirates. These Member States discussed actions taken, including enhancing coordinated and community-based mental health care; providing tools to enable schools to detect stress in children; and the development of guidance for families to help them detect and address psychological/ emotional and behavioural symptoms.

In her engagement with Member States, the SRSG-VAC noted that mental health and psychosocial support services are seen as essential services in many countries and are provided through a variety of channels for maximum outreach, including online platforms, in schools, and in community and health centres. Peer-to-peer support is also being provided by children themselves. The SRSG-VAC hopes to see all of these initiatives brought to scale.

Education and Early Childhood Development



“I have this idea that education is the key so that all the SDGs can be completed. Education in Mexico as in other parts of the world has decreased, since many low-income students, because they do not have internet and technology, are in need of leaving school, plus unemployment and shortage of work...” Girl Mexico, age unknown, Let’s tell the world campaign submission

Schools can be the setting for forms of violence such as bullying, corporal punishment and sexual exploitation and abuse that must be addressed directly. But schools can also be an early detection mechanism for violence and neglect that happens in a child’s home or their community. Children exposed to violence and other adversities at home or at school are more likely to drop out of education, compromising their chances of becoming productive citizens. Realizing the right of all children to a safe,⁶ inclusive⁷ and quality education plays a foundational role in creating more productive, equal and inclusive societies.

Experiencing toxic stress and violence in early childhood can alter the development of the brain structure and function, such as language acquisition and cognitive functioning, which can result in deficits in social and emotional competency. Later in life, these can decrease economic productivity, increase the likelihood of intergenerational poverty, and perpetuate violence in personal relationships.

A safe and inclusive learning environment

Only limited information was available on the Member States’ actions to achieve “safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.” However, three Member States, Eswatini, Latvia, and Montenegro, discussed issues related to peer violence in school settings, including bullying and the actions taken to address it. These actions included establishing national action plans, as well as guidelines for violence prevention and toll-free hotlines for reporting.

Supporting education through Internet access

While violence against children online is an increasing concern, Member States also discussed achieving affordable and universal Internet access for all, especially in relation to supporting children’s access to education during the school closures triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of Member States reported on the issue of accessibility to distance learning and/or actions taken, including Cameroon, Eswatini, Gabon, the Gambia, Ghana, Greece, Jamaica, Jordan, Lesotho, the Netherlands, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Uruguay. Actions included

6. Target 4: a safe and non-violent environment for education.

7. Reference to inclusivity refers to different levels including gender, cultural, and socio-economic status. Target 11.4 calls for strengthened efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.

establishing a policy framework to enhance cooperation with the private sector for increased Internet access; teacher training in digital literacy; and financial assistance to families for the purchase of digital devices during this period. Some Member States expressed concern about how the 'digital divide' is exacerbating the learning gap between children. TV and radio programmes were also mentioned as alternatives to e-learning.

Positive discipline⁸

Three Member States, Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau and Suriname, discussed corporal punishment in various settings, mainly to mention its prevalence.

In her engagement with Member States, the SRSG-VAC noted governments' efforts to make the learning environment in and around schools – including online learning – safer through awareness-raising campaigns, training for teachers and staff and families, establishing reporting protocols, and encouraging peer support. The SRSG-VAC hopes to see these initiatives brought to scale.

Decent Work



Decent work for all, including women, young people and migrant workers, promotes sustainable economic growth and enables families and caregivers to provide for the health, development and protection of their children. In stark contrast, child labour is an egregious form of violence that is contrary to the very concept of decent work and must be ended. It harms the health, development and education of children and perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation.

Ending child labour

More than 20 reports mentioned child labour, including those from Argentina, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, El Salvador, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Jamaica, Jordan, Lesotho, Mali, Montenegro, Netherlands, Sao Tome and Principe, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Switzerland and Togo. Many highlighted the nexus of child labour, child trafficking and sexual violence. Some notable actions included the creation of a child labour risk identification model and the establishment of a statutory obligation by businesses to report on sustainability and due diligence on conflict minerals⁹ and child labour.

8. Corporal punishment not only related to SDG 16 but also to SDG 4.
 9. Minerals mined in an area of armed conflict and traded illicitly to finance the fighting.

The SRSG-VAC welcomes the legislative reforms in many countries to prohibit child labour, as well as investment in early childhood and primary education to reduce the risks of children falling into poverty and child labour. As tourism restarted in the post-pandemic period, she noted the resumption of the implementation of the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism. She also noted policy frameworks in some Member States that focus on the rehabilitation and reintegration of children in street situations.

A safe, clean and connected living environment



Safe and healthy living environments, including accessible public transportation systems, water and sanitation, modern energy and technology, are essential for children's well-being and protection. For example, children are often tasked with fetching water and firewood for the household, and those travelling long distances to do so are at risk of violence. Long hours spent on these tasks also compromise their development and education.

Access to information and communication technologies (ICT) enhances children's learning and increases their opportunities for social contact and access to protection, as well as their participation. Various web-based helplines for children saw an increase in contacts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online world can also put children at risk of exploitation and abuse, which harm their health (including their mental health), education and development.

Safe access to the Internet

Only a few Member States noted the issue of the protection of children online, including Argentina, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Senegal and the United Arab Emirates. This is a surprisingly low number, given the extent and growing scale of violence against children online. Some Member States noted that children's increased use of smartphones and the Internet is increasing their exposure to various forms of violence and exploitation. They also discussed the development of national child online protection strategies, the establishment of government-led mechanisms for reporting and removing child sexual abuse materials, and the enactment of policies on the well-being of children online, accompanied by knowledge platforms for capacity building. Member States also discussed the need for campaigns to raise awareness of online risks among children and their families, and the inclusion of this issue as an integral part of formal education curricula.

In her engagement with Member States, the SRSG-VAC noted that the issue of children's protection online is often addressed separately from the rest of the protection system. Stressing the ease with which children's risk of violence can move back and forth between online settings and an in-person environment, the SRSG-VAC urges the holistic protection of children, whether online or off-line.

Climate Action



"Our climate and environment play a very important role in our lives. I want people to understand that the change of climate does not only affect our lives, but our future generations' too. If you stand up together, and put in the effort to make a change, then the environment will thank you. It promises you the freshest air and the purest water, the tallest mountains and the freshest trees, then we must also show our responsibility and promise the restoration of the environment. If we put the effort into it, we can do it. Anything is possible." Girl, 13, India

The climate crisis and its severe consequences, particularly for already vulnerable populations, is fuelling the drivers of violence such as poverty, migration and displacement and lack of access to education. It is a threat multiplier¹⁰ for forms of violence against children such as child marriage, child labour and child trafficking. Urgent and child-sensitive adaptation to and mitigation of the impacts of the climate crisis are essential to reduce the risks of violence against children that it presents.

A number of Member States discussed how they are incorporating the issue of climate change and environment into their education curriculum, including Eswatini, Latvia, Mali, and Sao Tome and Principe. Others discussed emergency education action plans, which would ensure continuation of education in climate related emergencies.

At least 14 VNRs reported specific aspects of climate policy frameworks related to children: Dominica, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, the Gambia, Ghana, Italy, Jamaica, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxembourg, Mali, Montenegro and Togo. Some of these reports discussed the nexus between climate resilience and poverty and indicated that climate change is mainstreamed into national development planning and budgeting. A number of the reports discussed the importance of relevant information on climate change that is available and accessible to everyone, including children and youth, on issues such as sustainable ways of living. Some also mentioned that their national action plan on climate and for disaster risk reduction paid specific attention to children and women. Additional actions included a variety of awareness raising campaigns and initiatives targeting families and children.

10. The Climate Crisis and Violence against Children

In her engagement on the climate crisis with Member States and with children, the SRSG-VAC was reminded that children who are the least responsible for this crisis are paying the highest price, while consideration for their well-being in climate change mitigation policies remains inadequate. The SRSG-VAC strongly recommends increased investment in cross-sectoral, child-sensitive climate policies that address the specific risks to and vulnerabilities of children, as well as the drivers of violence linked to climate change.

Children on the move



Without a legal status and the protection and access to services that comes with it, children on the move are at increased risk of various forms of violence, exploitation and abuse. Strengthening social, economic and political inclusion can help to address some of the push factors for migration, while policies and practices that support orderly, safe and regular migration can help to mitigate the risks of violence for children and their families.

Children on the move are vulnerable to various forms of violence. Most of the VNRs mentioned the issue of migration as an important concern, while a number of Member States discussed their national policy frameworks and actions that focus on the protection of children in this context, including Djibouti, Ethiopia, Greece, Guinea-Bissau, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland. These actions ranged from enhancing access to education for migrant children to cash transfers to support migrant families.

Several VNRs, including those for Cameroon, Djibouti, Greece, Liberia, Mali and Sudan, mentioned the situation of refugee families and children alongside other children on the move, such as migrants or as part of vulnerable groups.

In her engagement with Member States, the SRSG-VAC noted that the rights of migrant children in some countries are guaranteed by ensuring access to essential services, including health and education, and by providing an adequate living environment and avoiding child detention. These approaches need to be brought to scale.

Gender equality and discrimination



“I don’t want to grow up in a society that doesn’t appreciate my role as a girl. My achievements may now be simple, but when I grow up, my achievements will grow with me, and society must allow me to realize my dreams and myself. Society has to be more just and more open to allow girls to drive and make a difference. I don’t want my ambition to stop at a routine job I do. I know

that my dream today is impossible to achieve in this community and traveling to another community may be a solution that helps realise the dream. But I think that changing our own community and developing it would be a better solution and will help a lot of girls like me.” Jessica, 16, Lebanon International Young Catholic Students, information received via submission.

Gender inequalities and discrimination increase the risk of violence, putting girls and women at particular risk and inhibiting their ability to seek protection. Social and cultural norms and practices that condone violence¹¹ and the unequal treatment of girls limit their access to education. This reduces their choices and opportunities in life and, therefore, drives cycles of poverty and deprivation.

Promoting gender equality and addressing gender-based violence

Almost all VNRs noted actions to address gender-based violence, including the establishment or enhancement of legal and coordination frameworks, and national plans of action to achieve greater gender equality. Some frameworks mentioned specific forms of violence against women and girls, as well as a more holistic emphasis on the pursuit of greater gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Most reports discussed gender-based violence. A number of Member States reported on domestic violence, violence in the home, and intimate partner violence, as well as measures taken to address them, including Andorra, Belarus, Botswana, Dominica, Eswatini, Gabon, the Gambia, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lesotho, Luxembourg, Malawi, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Sao Tome and Principe, Sudan, Switzerland and Uruguay.

Several reports discussed the linkage between an increase in domestic violence and movement restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Member States noted actions taken to prevent, respond, and strengthen accountability through legal reform; capacity building of law enforcement sectors; strengthened coordination among various line ministries and civil society partners; and ensuring access to essential services for victims, such as shelters, counselling and toll-free hotlines. Member States also discussed the under-reporting of domestic and intimate partner violence and expressed the need for increased funding to address this issue.

More than 10 Member States reported on child marriage and the actions taken to address it, including Botswana, Cameroon, Eswatini, Gabon, Ghana, Jordan, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Montenegro and Sudan. Similarly, at least 11 Member States reported on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and actions taken to address this form of violence: Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Senegal, Somalia and Sudan. Community involvement is an important aspect of addressing these harmful practices. A number

11. Target 5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

of Member States, including Ethiopia, Senegal, Somalia and Sudan, discussed campaigns and other activities that involve community and religious/traditional leaders in transforming the social and cultural norms that condone these harmful practices and discrimination against women and girls.

In her engagement with Member States, the SRSG-VAC noted that governments are increasingly aware of how gender-based violence intersects with violence against children, and the risk that those exposed to domestic violence in childhood may perpetrate violence themselves as adults. In addition to legislation, it is important to involve and empower religious, faith and community leaders and children themselves to enhance positive social norms.

Peaceful, inclusive and just societies



“I am trying to spread awareness of child rights and because where I live, I’ve seen so many children dealing with so many problems like poverty, no source of education and domestic violence.” Boy, Pakistan, age unknown

The risks of violence against children are heightened by poverty and inequality, forced displacement, ongoing humanitarian crises, conflicts and violence, and the impact of the climate crisis, which can expose them to forms of violence such as trafficking and deprivation of liberty in the context of detention related to migration and peaceful protest. These risk factors even normalize violence against children. Organized criminal activity, underpinned by evolving technologies such as the darknet, encryption and the use of cryptocurrencies, make the detection of crime and the pursuit of justice even harder.

Achieving justice for children means ensuring that penal, civil and administrative justice systems are child-friendly and that they prioritize children’s well-being. At the same time, justice for children also encompasses the broader concepts of social and environmental justice as an integral part of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies.

Child-friendly justice systems guarantee the right to a remedy for child victims, are accountable to children, use deprivation of liberty of children in conflict with the law as a measure of last resort, and prioritize restorative justice approaches.

Social justice must be afforded to all children. This also includes migrant and stateless children who often live in inadequate living conditions and lack access to essential services such as education, health and justice.

The right to legal identity (including birth registration)¹² and equal access to justice¹³ have positive effects on the protective environment that surrounds children, acting as a safeguard against child labour, exploitation, trafficking and child marriage. They are essential for the realization of children's rights to basic services such as health, social protection, education and justice.

SDG 16 on peaceful and just societies embraces effective and inclusive institutions that are accountable to all people, including children. The achievement of greater social and economic equality would generate greater inclusion and justice, reduce poverty and make the environment around children less conducive to violence.

Children's access to justice

At least 16 Member States shared their current or planned work to strengthen the justice system for children, including Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Ghana, Greece, Guinea-Bissau, Jamaica, Latvia, Liberia, Luxembourg, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Senegal, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Togo. Examples included the establishment of special units dedicated to child protection in the police force and child-friendly courts; training for relevant workers in the areas of social welfare and legal sectors, as well as law enforcement; and improved access to legal services. Some discussed specific legislation to reduce the number of children coming into contact with the formal legal system by diverting them to rehabilitation programmes.

Birth registration and documentation

At least 16 Member States reported an increase in birth registration over the past decade, including Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Eswatini, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Malawi, Pakistan, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal and Togo. Their VNRs noted good practices such as the training of health personnel to facilitate the registration process, including maternity and vaccination workers, civil servants, and community leaders. Some also discussed the decline in the number of registrations during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent uptick when movement restrictions were lifted. Some discussed measures taken to register children whose parents are not nationals of the country or do not have proof of identification. Others reported that registration was made more accessible by offering free birth certificates, accessible locations and better technology to handle the process.

In her engagements with Member States, the SRSG-VAC has advocated for justice systems that are more child friendly. These systems should be accessible to children and provide a package of protection services. Providing remedies and accountability for child victims is an essential part of justice and helps in the healing process.

12. Target 16.9 By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration

13. Target 16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all

The SRSG-VAC stresses that birth registration is essential to realizing children's rights to basic services and notes the importance of birth registration and the granting of nationality to children to prevent statelessness.

Addressing child trafficking¹⁴

The majority of Member States reported on the issue of human trafficking, while at least nine Member States discussed the issue of child trafficking specifically: Andorra, Belarus, Greece, Guinea-Bissau, Jamaica, Lesotho, the Netherlands, Sudan and Switzerland. In terms of prevention and detection, some specific protocols to strengthen the protection systems were mentioned: child protection professionals accompanying children who are crossing borders alone; information campaigns with signposting for access to relevant services and hotlines; and establishing a checklist to identify victims of child trafficking.

Multi-lateral and bi-lateral cooperation were highlighted. Member States mentioned strengthening and establishing protocols/systems for detection, providing services/ referrals, and capacity building for social services and law enforcement personnel to address trafficking.

The SRSG-VAC welcomes national and regional efforts to prevent and end child trafficking. However, despite the positive efforts being made, child trafficking is increasing. The SRSG-VAC is reminded that the vicious cycle of child trafficking will not end unless this issue is addressed in a holistic and multi-faceted manner by investing resources to reduce children's vulnerabilities; increasing the risks to traffickers by working in partnerships (including with the ICT sectors); and tackling the demand for the services of sale, slavery and exploitation of children by ensuring accountability and legal reforms.

Children as agents of change



"It's essential to empower adolescents and children. We don't want to be spectators of change, we want to be protagonists of a society that changes and deconstructs itself to form an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future". Julieta, Chile, 17 'Tremendas', information collected via interview

A successful national development plan requires inclusive partnerships – at the global, regional, national, and local levels – that are based on shared visions, principles and values that place all people, including children, at the centre. Children are agents of change¹⁵ and need to be a part of participatory and representative decision-making processes.¹⁶

14. Child trafficking is also related to SDG 8.

15. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development | Department of Economic and Social Affairs (un.org), paragraph 51.

16. Target 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all level

When children engage with their peers and adult counterparts in civic activities, it helps to strengthen their protection against violence, as well as the prevention of and response to that violence. Children's meaningful participation as peaceful agents of change is empowering not only to each child individually, but also collectively to their entire generation. Participation strengthens their sense of self-confidence and citizenship, deepens their understanding of their rights, creates an environment that is conducive to speaking up, and helps to redress the injustices suffered by themselves and their peers. Safe, inclusive and accessible public spaces¹⁷ are essential for the creation of such an environment.

Participation of children in decision making

The majority of VNRs mentioned the importance of a participatory approach for the implementation and review process of the 2030 Agenda and noted the participation of various stakeholders in the development of the report, including civil society actors. At least nine countries mentioned the involvement of children in their VNR development specifically, including Andorra, Eswatini, Ghana, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi and the Philippines. An additional 10 or more countries mentioned that 'youth' or 'students' (which may have also included children under 18) participated in the process, including Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, Senegal, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Togo. Surveys, interviews, and consultations were a common means of involving children and young people. Children's involvement in the VNR was often found in the report's section on process and "leaving no one behind", but is seldom linked explicitly to Goal 16 (Target 16.7).

The SRSG-VAC welcomes the examples of Member States involving children in decision making processes. Increasingly, children are seen as partners in creating a peaceful and just society. It is also encouraging to see Member States involving children in the development of the VNRs and their presentations at the HLPF – a trend the SRSG-VAC hopes will continue to grow. She also hopes to see more concrete examples of the systematic involvement of children in national decision-making processes.

As children increasingly take leadership roles in initiatives that concern them, such as climate action and peer-to-peer support, their voices and actions need to be amplified.

Leaving no one behind

In the spirit of "leaving no one behind", the majority of VNRs identified groups of vulnerable populations such as the elderly, people with disabilities and children in difficult circumstances, highlighting the challenges they face and actions taken to improve their well-being.

17. Target 11.7: By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.

More than 20 Member States noted specific settings of vulnerability for children and discussed actions taken to enhance their protection, including: Andorra, Argentina, Belarus, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominica, El Salvador, Eritrea, Gabon, the Gambia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lesotho, Mali, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Philippines, Senegal, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname and Togo. Notably, children with disabilities were mentioned in more than 15 VNRs. The reports discussed policy frameworks to support their access to education and integration into the mainstream education system as part of the actions taken.

Andorra, Greece and Lesotho noted people who identified as LGBTI+ as vulnerable populations, with a particular focus on young people, and/or discussed the actions taken to enhance their protection.

Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Pakistan and Senegal discussed children without parental care and the support provided for them, such as targeted social services, de-institutionalization and placement in family settings. Greece, Somalia and Sudan discussed children from minority communities and the support provided to promote their wider social inclusion, including access to education.

Other settings and forms of vulnerability were mentioned, including children in street situations, child-headed households, herd boys,¹⁸ young mothers who are of school age, and children with HIV/AIDS or whose parents/caregivers are living with HIV/AIDS. These mentions noted, for the most part, that these children and young people need more support.

The information presented in this report is a selection of the examples found in the 2022 VNRs and is not exhaustive. Many other good practices are being implemented at the local and national levels that may not be included in the VNRs. The Office of the SRSG-VAC would be pleased to hear about actions by Member States to mainstream children's rights, protection and well-being in SDG implementation and review processes.¹⁹

18. Boys who tend herds or assist a herder. Herd boys tend livestock in the mountains, watching over them and protecting them from thieves. These boys may have limited interactions with other people and lack educational opportunities, making them vulnerable to exploitation and other forms of violence.

19. Please send an email to srsg-vac@un.org.



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON
VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

