



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

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Violence, poverty and social exclusion

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Excellencies, dear friends,

It gives me great pleasure to join you in this morning's high-level side event.

The Sustainable Development Agenda calls for a world which invests in children and in which every child grows up free from want, from fear and from violence. The Agenda seeks to transform the world, leaving no one behind – and the best way to avoid leaving children behind is by putting them first!

The 2030 Agenda creates an unmissable opportunity to galvanize political will, generate wide support and mobilize action to enable children to develop to their full potential.

And it conveys a deep sense of urgency! Indeed, the task at hand is enormous and the figures are staggering: Countless millions of children live in dire poverty; barely surviving and on the margins of society: in fact, half of the people living in extreme poverty are children¹ and the youngest are the worst off. Every five minutes a child dies as a result of violence. One billion children globally experience emotional, physical or sexual violence every year. This means half of the world's children!

1.

Poverty, social exclusion and violence are intertwined. As we learned from the implementation of the MDGs, countries affected by violence tend to lag behind, with higher levels of child poverty and malnutrition, poor health and school performance and special risks for vulnerable children, including those forced to leave their homes to seek refuge in a place of safety.

Violence against children takes place in all settings and in all countries, even those that are economically affluent. But where poverty is pervasive, the risk of neglect, abuse and exploitation can become particularly acute.²

¹ One child in five in high-income countries lives in poverty (Innocenti Report Card 2017)

² CHILD TRENDS - Aside from physical and mental health, poverty in childhood and adolescence is associated with a higher risk for poorer cognitive and academic outcomes, lower school attendance, lower reading and math test scores, increased distractibility, and higher rates of grade failure and early high school dropout.[11],[12] Poor children are also more likely than other children to have externalizing and other behavior problems, or emotional problems,[13],[14] and are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors during adolescence.[15] Finally, growing up in poverty is associated with lower occupational status and lower wages,[16],[17] poorer health,[18] and deficits in working memory[19] in adulthood.

And then children lag behind too: they are at high risk of suffering toxic stress, with an irreversible impact on their brain development and wellbeing, compromising learning, endangering health and favouring risky behavior.

Children living in communities where family incomes are low and jobs are few, in impoverished neighbourhoods with insecure and inadequate housing, and limited access to basic social services of quality, are all more likely to experience violence in their lives. They may live in informal settlements in the world's largest cities, with schools, health facilities and other services situated only blocks away, but the socioeconomic distance can be insurmountable.

As families struggle, children can become more vulnerable to neglect and exploitation. They may be pressed to drop out of school, either to avoid fees or to work to contribute to the household's income. Girls are at high risk of being drawn into hazardous activities, such as domestic service, as well as forced into sexual exploitation; they may even be forced to marry: in fact, the risk of child marriage is three times higher amongst the poorest girls. And with her early marriage a girl risks joining a household of deprivation and abuse; suffering poor health, early pregnancy and an increased risk of dying in childbirth, as well as the risk of her children dying very early in their lives.

Poverty weakens support systems to families and limits access to violence prevention and response services. The situation of children with disabilities illustrates this well: as data shows, the prevalence of disability tends to be higher among children from poorer households. Poverty can contribute to disability through inadequate health care, poor nutrition and unsafe living conditions. And disability can aggravate income poverty, as families of children with disabilities forgo employment opportunities and face additional costs for medical care, housing and transport. But in addition, children with disabilities are also more likely to experience physical, psychological or sexual violence than other children, including infanticide, beatings, bullying, and emotional and sexual abuse.

Poverty contributes to stigma and is a daily assault on a person's self-esteem. And all too often, it is the poorest children who endure the torment of bullying, humiliation and abuse, who feel powerless to speak up, and fear being blamed for the incidents, and frightened to be further harassed.

And yet, children from poor families and communities may become easy targets for organised crime. They may be coerced, through social pressure or the promise of financial reward to hold or deliver drugs or weapons, or to carry out petty crime, or be forced into sexual exploitation activities. In essence victims, these children often end up stigmatized, perceived as a threat and, at times, subject to deprivation of liberty.

4.

Violence and deprivation have a cumulative impact on children's development and well-being and contribute to a vicious cycle of poverty and abuse. But the costs for society are very high too: according to some studies, every year, violence against children costs the global economy more than 7 trillion US dollars.

But what these figures fail to include are the immense costs of the stunted development of children caused by violence and deprivation in early years and the irreversible loss of their potential to become more productive members of society.

And what they also neglect are the gains that could be made by investing in effective prevention strategies which have a high social return – for example, according to a recent study, ending child marriage could save more than half a trillion US dollars by 2030; and ending early child births could save more than 700 billion.

Violence and deprivation need not be children's fate!

And we see more and more Governments placing children at the heart of their development efforts, recognising that investing in violence prevention is closely associated with poverty eradication, and that both are indispensable to build cohesive and peaceful societies. The important measures undertaken by Indonesia, Sweden and Chile being presented today illustrate this well. And many of this year's Voluntary National Reports show how multi-sector policies and services are helping to tackle the multiple risks faced by children and their families, especially those surrounded by poverty and social exclusion.

6.

These are welcome promising signs. But the countdown to 2030 has long since started and the clock is ticking. There is no time for complacency!

Poverty and violence leave long lasting scars on children's lives and can shape a life of vulnerability and deprivation. They are often transmitted across generations and weaken the very foundation of social progress.

Investing in children is crucial to reverse this pattern! But there is still a long way to go!

While half of those living in extreme poverty are children and half of the world's children are affected by violence each year, national resource allocations for these fundamental dimensions of children's wellbeing are seldom a priority. And ODA mobilized for some of the world's poorest countries remains wholly insufficient. Indeed, the average ODA investment per child and per year in low income countries amounts to less than US\$0.65, or less than 0.6 per cent of total ODA.

This is clearly an area where greater domestic and donor resources are needed if we are to give children a genuine opportunity to develop to their full potential.

It was with this concern that we organized last month, together with ASEAN, our Seventh Cross-Regional Round Table on Violence against Children. Regional organizations and institutions are crucial catalysts of progress and their commitment to place children at the heart of the SDGs was strong and clear, as they called for greater cross-sectoral cooperation and for child-friendly health, education, justice and social services to ensure children's social inclusion and prevent abuse and exploitation. We are delighted to be welcoming today some of those regional organizations who are crucial allies of our global efforts.

Dear Friends,

Ending violence against children is an ethical and legal imperative that makes economic sense and helps break the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty and violence. But, as I so often hear during my missions, it is the voices of children demanding an end to violence and marginalization that is our most compelling and urgent reason for action. And only by placing children at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, and at the centre of all we do to achieve its implementation, will we realize its vision of a world free from fear and violence!

I look forward to learning from you during our dialogue and thank you for your attention.