



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

**STATEMENT BY THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL
ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

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Expert consultation on protecting children from bullying and cyberbullying

**Florence
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Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

A very warm welcome to you all! I am delighted to join you at this important expert consultation on protecting children from bullying and cyberbullying. I am very grateful to all of you who have travelled from far to share your excellent work and critical advice! And I want to thank very warmly Sarah and her great team at the Innocenti Centre for their strong support in the preparation of this expert consultation.

This meeting represents a golden opportunity to strengthen children's protection from bullying and cyberbullying. I am deeply inspired by the presence of such an excellent group of experts with a unique experience in this area, representing different regions, institutions and disciplines, and sharing a decisive commitment to promoting a child-centered approach to ending this form of violence against children.

Bullying and cyberbullying are priority concerns for my mandate as Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children. And these were in fact important dimensions addressed by the UN Study on Violence against Children.

Building upon that work, over recent years my Office has prepared a number of studies and reports of relevance to this topic: the 2013 Global Survey on violence against children; thematic studies on tackling violence in schools and on the potential and risks associated with information and communications technologies; and most recently my 2016 annual report to the Human Rights Council, which gave special attention to the protection of children from cyberbullying. Thanks to your presence and support, today's meeting marks a major milestone in this important work in this process!

Dear friends,

Our Expert Consultation is taking place at a very auspicious time. As many of you know, 2016 marks 10 years since the UN Study on Violence against Children was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, and 20 years since the hosting of the first World Congress against the Sexual Exploitation of Children, where for the very first a special attention was given to what was called at that time the "new media" and its potentially negative impact on children's rights to protection from abuse and exploitation. These anniversaries provide a timely reminder of the sound normative and evidence foundation on which we can build our actions, and also a reminder of the urgency of our cause!

Secondly, this meeting gains a special relevance in the light of the adoption, last September, of the new global development agenda, commonly known as Agenda 2030. **The Agenda addresses violence against children as a cross-cutting concern, and includes concrete commitments under a number of goals and targets.** For example, under Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, it highlights the importance of knowledge and skills on human rights and the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, as well as the provision of child-, gender- and disability- sensitive facilities and safe, non-violent,

inclusive and effective learning environments for all. And most especially, under Goal 16 on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, the **Agenda includes a specific target “to end all forms of violence against children by 2030”**. This is an historic achievement! It provides a unique opportunity to promote an unstoppable movement of social change to build a world where children are free from fear and from violence; and it certainly also enhances a widely shared sense of accountability for children.

Thirdly, the General Assembly of the United Nations has increasingly turned its attention to the question of bullying in recent years. The issue figured high in the GA’s most recent thematic debate on children’s rights and the right to education. And, most importantly, in December 2014, the GA adopted a landmark resolution on the protection of children from bullying and cyberbullying.

Following an at times difficult and intense debate, the resolution recognized the negative impact of bullying and cyberbullying on the rights of the child and called on Member States to take action to prevent and address this phenomenon across a range of domains, including prevention, awareness-raising, investment in education and consolidation of data.

The resolution also called on the Secretary-General to prepare a report on this topic. The report is to be submitted to the General Assembly later this year and should identify major concerns, document good practices and positive experiences, and anticipate strategic recommendations to inform future action. My Office was asked to coordinate the preparation of this report.

Dear friends,

It is against this background that our meeting is taking place. And we are delighted to count on your excellent support to transform this opportunity into a very successful outcome. A crucial dimension of the process of preparing the Secretary-General’s report is of course engaging in focused consultations with eminent experts, as we do today.

In addition, the preparation of the report has been informed by responses to a questionnaire sent to Member States, United Nations agencies and actors, regional organizations, national independent human rights institutions, civil society organizations and other stakeholders; as well as by a literature review of studies and reports undertaken by research and academic institutions, human rights mechanisms, private sector and social media entities.

But in a topic such as this, the perceptions, experience and recommendations of children are of fundamental importance – their ideas and views will therefore also be a central component of the report. In addition to drawing on the excellent work undertaken by many partners, we are consulting with children directly – later this month in Latin America. Moreover, we are joining hands with UNICEF’s U-Report platform to gain an insight into children’s perspectives on this phenomenon. The U-Report can reach 2 million children, the majority in Africa – a region where information about children’s experiences is often scarce. Although

the results of the U-report exercise will only be fully known in the coming weeks, preliminary results indicate that:

- 97% believe bullying is a problem,
- 69% have been a victim of bullying (36% because of the way they look),
- 46% told no-one,
- 37% think bullying happens because adults don't see it, and 38% because it's part of school
- 39% think schools should create awareness to stop bullying
- 68% believe kids are most bullied in person.

Dear friends,

Your wisdom on this topic is invaluable and we count on your expertise and insight. As you know, we have prepared a background document to support our discussions – but this document constitutes simply a starting point. My hope is that over these two days you will identify issues to which we should be giving greater visibility and prominence, new facets of the problem that should be included, concerns that should be addressed, promising examples of good practices that can stimulate and boost action by governments following their review of the report to the General Assembly.

The General Assembly's consideration of the Secretary-General's report will be an important stage, as it will bring this often neglected topic to the United Nations' highest deliberative forum. But the real aim is to provide a new impetus to international efforts to prevent and address bullying and influence a process of lasting change.

Dear friends,

One of the great values of our meeting is the opportunity to explore a topic of shared concern from very different perspectives, and enrich our considerations with the sound and diverse and background of all of you.

As we know, protecting children from bullying is not just an ethical imperative or a laudable aim of public health or social policy – it is a question of human rights and of states' accountability formally assumed upon ratification of the CRC and other international standards.

Bullying and cyberbullying compromise children's right to freedom from violence, to protection from discrimination, to an inclusive and relevant education and the highest attainable standard of health, to the right to be heard and have their children's best interests regarded as a primary consideration in all decisions affecting their life. Thus, addressing this phenomenon cannot be an afterthought or a vague intention. It requires steadfast action and clear progress. Our discussions can help identify key recommendations in this regard.

Bullying is very often part of a continuum, happening at different moments in the course of children's lives, and in different settings – at school, in the community, at home and increasingly in the online world. As we know, the impact of any form of violence on children's development and well-being is serious and long lasting. In the case of bullying and cyberbullying it is also largely surrounded by deep sense of loneliness and helplessness, and even shame.

This is well-attested by the many heartfelt personal testimonies we have gathered as part of the preparation for the study. But it is also confirmed by available data and by science, including neuroscience.

Last week, at a symposium held at UNICEF, in New York, some of the latest research on the development of the adolescent brain was shared by leading scientists in the field. As highlighted then, a second spurt of rapid brain development that begins with the onset of puberty in adolescents presents tremendous opportunities when their environment and social context is supportive and favourable; but it can also present significant challenges when these factors are less optimal. Certain aspects of brain development in adolescents makes them particularly sensitive to being evaluated socially and highly self-conscious; they easily feel embarrassed, disrespected and humiliated and equally crave opportunities for a sense of belonging, to be socially-accepted and admired. Being bullied is the anti-thesis of the positive and affirming environment that adolescents need during the vulnerable developmental stage when their bodies and brains are transitioning to adulthood. The symposium also highlighted that, differently from other very difficult and stressful situations, such as those encountered by displaced and refugee children escaping crisis zones who may benefit from a sense of community and support in shared adversity with families and friends, child victims of bullying suffer deeply from a sense of isolation, loneliness and helplessness. And they can be set off on a negative trajectory that may lead to excessive risk-taking, aggression, substance-abuse and depression.

But this is not a fate! And positive and supportive efforts can prevent and reverse such negative consequences. Together, we have an opportunity to acknowledge major concerns but highlight in addition effective strategies to achieve lasting change.

Dear friends,

Data is another crucial dimension we will discuss. There is often the perception that very few countries have data on bullying and cyberbullying. Sometimes, there is weak national capacity to gather and analyse data, in some cases aggravated by insufficient efforts to integrate existing data sources and disseminate and use data findings. In other cases, there is also a political reticence or resistance to probe into a phenomenon that touches on vulnerable, marginalized and stigmatized groups, such as LGBTI young people or children with disabilities.

In our discussions, it will be particularly helpful to reflect on what the most important gaps in data collection are to assess the magnitude of this phenomenon, to track different manifestations of bullying, and to consider geographical variations in the quality of information available. Moreover, what practical steps can be taken to remedy the deficiencies identified in this area, including with a view to capturing children's perceptions and recommendations for action?

Another theme we will address is awareness-raising, social mobilization and public policies to break the hidden nature of this form of violence, sadly regarded by many as a "normal" part of childhood, and mobilize action and support to prevent and eliminate its occurrence.

Public policies providing strategic direction are crucial in this regard. But how can we help governments evolve from a silo approach into a well-coordinated and participatory process? Your opinions on effective interventions and the ingredients of success are particularly welcome; as are your suggestions on how different stakeholders and sectors can best work together, which may also include other actors who have not traditionally been part of a coordinated response to bullying but who can make an important contribution to this effort.

Legislation and redress for victims are other important dimensions in our agenda. Legislation is a crucial dimension of any strategy to protect children from violence and to fight impunity. But in this area, developments are recent and at times create further risks for children concerned – including when punitive approaches are foreseen in criminal legislation, or safeguards are not in place to prevent children's re-victimization. In addition to gaining a deeper perspective about different legislative approaches pursued at the national level, we would welcome your views on ways of consolidating positive implementation efforts and in enhancing children's skills to participate safely and confidently in administrative and judicial proceedings, and make full use of available complaint and reporting mechanisms.

Naturally, the role of the education system is another crucial aspect we will address. Schools have been particularly active in this area and many of you are critical players in strengthening their capacity to address bullying and cyberbullying. Education at all stages, starting in early childhood, has a unique potential to generate a positive environment where attitudes condoning violence can be changed, and non-violent behavior can be promoted. We also need to consider how bullying affects children in non-formal education or who are out-of-school. But how can we turn this opportunity around to make it effective and empowering for all children, helping to release their potential and ready to stand up for children's rights?

Dear friends,

I know that the next two days will be stimulating, challenging and inspiring!

Thank you once again for being with us I am very much looking forward to working with you all, old friends and new, to learning from your uniquely rich experience and to gathering new ideas and new approaches.

