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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development****Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-
General on Violence against Children***Summary*

In the present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 74/133, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Najat Maalla M'jid, provides an overview of major initiatives and developments that sustain and scale up efforts to safeguard children's freedom from violence and advance implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. She also outlines the immediate and longer-term impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on children's protection and well-being, as well as the role of children as agents of change in building a world free from violence. The report contains key recommendations for accelerating action for implementation of the 2030 Agenda while building back better after the pandemic.



I. Introduction

1. In the present report, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children reviews the action she has taken at the global, regional and national levels to fulfil her mandate, and provides an overview of the results achieved. She also provides an overview of the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on children's protection and well-being. The report also includes a thematic section focused on children acting as agents of change and as part of the solution towards building back better after the pandemic and creating a world free from violence.
2. Guided by General Assembly resolution 62/141, by which the Assembly established the mandate, the Special Representative is an independent global advocate who acts to promote the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children.
3. The year covered in the present report was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented global impact, which necessitated swift adaptation of the mandate holder's planned activities. The Special Representative made full use of her mandate as a convener and bridge-builder to engage with a wide range of actors in response to the challenges created by the pandemic.
4. The pandemic and the mitigation measures taken have increased the risk of children to violence, especially those who were already vulnerable before the pandemic. They have also reduced the capacity of essential services to effectively prevent and respond to violence, and threaten to undermine the progress for children promised in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
5. The opportunity presented by building back better after the pandemic must be seized to reassess priorities to advance human development and reduce inequalities, especially for children and their communities. Children urgently need access to sustainably financed social protection systems linked to properly resourced child-protection services. The allocation of adequate budgets and the strengthening of services for the well-being of children and their protection from all forms of violence must be recognized as an investment that will be key to the success of the pandemic recovery.

II. Accelerating action to end violence against children by 2030, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

6. Since taking up the mandate, the Special Representative has stressed in her strategy the centrality of supporting implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the initiative of the Secretary-General to accelerate progress through the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals.

A. Supporting Member States in implementing the 2030 Agenda

7. A key element of the Special Representative's strategic approach is to engage with Member States preparing voluntary national reviews for submission to the high-level political forum on sustainable development. For this purpose, the Office of the Special Representative developed a briefing note for Member States with guidance on how to incorporate action to tackle violence against children into their implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level.¹ In the briefing note, the Office encourages Member States to use their voluntary national reviews to report on promising practices and initiatives that demonstrate how to prevent and respond to violence.
8. In 2020, the focus of the high-level political forum on sustainable development was on building back better after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Special Representative and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) jointly organized a "VNR Lab", where

¹ Available at https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/2020/vnr_doc_final.pdf.

Governments and children from five continents shared promising practices and approaches, highlighting linkages between children's rights and effective systems of social protection.

9. An analysis of the voluntary national reviews submitted to the 2020 high-level political forum on sustainable development revealed that information on progress in addressing violence against children has been included not only in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 16 but also in relation to Goals 4, 8 and 10 and in the introductory section on leaving no one behind. The reviews also revealed that there is still a lack of data on violence against children. Moreover, the reviews suggest that when violence against children is addressed, action is often undertaken without a clear, strategic approach to prevention and response. A summary of the reflections and recommendations of the Special Representative on the 2020 voluntary national reviews was shared with all Member States, the United Nations regional commissions and all United Nations resident coordinators. The Special Representative will continue to provide support to Member States presenting voluntary national reviews in 2021, through bilateral and multilateral engagement.

B. Strengthening collaboration and partnerships

10. The Special Representative has continued to develop partnerships with regional organizations as strategic allies. The partnerships have helped to place violence against children at the centre of regional policy agendas, while promoting the accountability of States and supporting their national implementation efforts.

11. In Asia, the Special Representative supported action to strengthen the protection of children online through her participation as keynote speaker at the first Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Conference on Child Online Protection. The Conference was aimed at building on the 2019 declaration adopted by ASEAN member States by which States parties committed to prioritize measures to increase the capacity within the subregion to strengthen the protection of children from all forms of online exploitation and abuse.

12. In June, to help raise awareness of the increased risk of violence to women and children resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic situation and the action needed in response, the Special Representative addressed a special online meeting of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children. The Special Representative and the UNICEF Regional Director for East Asia and the Pacific jointly issued a statement in support of the joint statement of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development, held in June 2020, focused on mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups in ASEAN member States. They encouraged ASEAN member States to ensure a multisectoral coordinated response to examine the impact of COVID-19 on children and rapidly restore front-line services for children, and prioritize the strengthening of services for the well-being of children, including child protection and social protection systems, when building back better after the pandemic.²

13. The Special Representative continued her engagement with the Council of Europe. She advocated for the inclusion of the issue of violence against children as a priority in the Council's 2022–2027 strategy for the rights of the child and its alignment with the 2030 Agenda, addressing the connection between social protection and child protection systems as part of a child rights-based approach to building back better. The Special Representative made similar recommendations to the European Union regarding its forthcoming strategy on the rights of the child for 2021–2024.

14. The Special Representative has pursued the development of a joint road map of action with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. She participated in the thirty-fifth session of the Committee³ and provided the Committee with technical support for its general comment on article 22 of the African Charter on the Rights

² See www.unicef.org/eap/press-releases/keep-well-being-children-centre-covid-19-response-and-recovery.

³ See www.acerwc.africa/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Final_Communique_35th_Ordinary_Session_ACERWC_English.pdf.

and Welfare of the Child. In order to consolidate cooperation with the Committee, the Special Representative issued, along with the Committee, a joint statement on ending violence against children in Africa on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.⁴ The Special Representative has continued to strengthen her collaboration with Member States and key partners in the Middle East and Northern Africa region. Collaboration with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia has served as a key component of the Special Representative's work on the Sustainable Development Goal implementation process within the region.

15. In the context of a forum on empowering girls, organized by the League of Arab States and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Special Representative strongly advocated for putting girls at the centre of measures implemented in countries in the region to build back better after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the Special Representative has promoted cooperation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the League of Arab States to support governments in the region in implementing the Arab strategy for the protection of children in asylum contexts.

16. The Special Representative continues to partner with civil society actors, including academics, children, young people and faith-based organizations, to support common initiatives. She has established quarterly briefings with regional and international civil society organizations to provide a platform for exchanging information, promoting action on key issues related to violence against children and exploring opportunities for collaboration.

17. The Special Representative is engaged in several United Nations inter-agency initiatives and working groups and chairs the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children. After providing input for the United Nations policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children,⁵ she swiftly mobilized the Working Group to issue a joint agenda for action on child protection and the COVID-19 pandemic,⁶ as a follow-up to the policy brief. The agenda for action provides guidance for Member States on how to include child protection in their COVID-19 response in both the short term and the long term.

18. The Special Representative also provided input for several technical notes issued by The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, including on children in detention, children in alternative care and violence at home, and contributed to the drafting process of the publication *Still Unprotected: Humanitarian Funding for Child Protection*, launched in October. The authors of the publication noted that the COVID-19 pandemic was disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable children, and emphasized the importance of ensuring that children's protection is central to responses to humanitarian crises. The Special Representative was invited as a high-level advocate to speak on the impact of COVID-19 on children's protection at numerous webinars and online conferences organized at the global, regional and national levels by Member States, United Nations entities and mechanisms and civil society and faith-based organizations.

19. The Special Representative continues to promote and strengthen collaboration within the United Nations system on ending violence against children, including with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, the human rights treaty bodies, the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Africa, the United Nations regional commissions, the United Nations resident coordinators and country team members, the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises. The Special Representative also has a leading role in the governance of the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children.

⁴ Available at <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/joint-statement-african-committee-experts-rights-and-welfare-child-and-united-nations-special>.

⁵ Available at <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-impact-covid-19-children>.

⁶ See https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/2020/agenda_for_action/agenda_iawg_on_vac_27_april_ready_for_launch.pdf.

C. Country visits

20. The most important work on violence against children takes place at the local and national levels. Country visits are therefore a key element of the advocacy strategy of the Special Representative. The visits are always planned and implemented in close cooperation with the United Nations country teams through entry briefings. A road map is usually provided at the end of the visit, and shared with the respective permanent mission in New York.

21. In March 2020, the Special Representative visited Indonesia to assess progress in the implementation of the national strategy on the elimination of violence against children for 2016–2020. During the visit she commended the Government for its regional and global leadership on promoting the ending of violence against children. She encouraged the Government to share within the region and globally its positive experience of using the framework of the 2030 Agenda to incorporate ending violence against children into its national planning. In meetings with high-level officials, she encouraged the Government to ensure that adequate budgets and human resources were made available to enable enhanced intersectoral collaboration and coordination at the local level on ending violence against children.

22. Also in March 2020, the Special Representative conducted a visit to Maldives, against the backdrop of the Government's strong commitment to strengthen the system of child protection in response to several cases of child sexual abuse that had shocked the public and mobilized public opinion in support of action. She met with senior officials across the Government to discuss the implementation of the recently adopted Child Rights Protection Act and Juvenile Justice Act. She encouraged the adoption of a child rights-based, cross-sectoral, fully costed and integrated approach to the reform of the child protection and juvenile justice systems, and the active engagement of civil society and children in the implementation of the new legislation.

23. The Special Representative had also planned visits to Iceland, Jordan, Lebanon, Lithuania, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia and Vanuatu in 2020, which had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, she engaged with these and other Member States through online means.

D. Follow-up to the global study on children deprived of liberty

24. Under the leadership of the Special Representative, and in support of the implementation of General Assembly resolution 74/133 and the recommendations contained in the report on the global study (A/74/136), the United Nations task force on the global study on children deprived of liberty was recently reconstituted with new terms of reference focused on follow-up to the recommendations that resulted from the study. Its work is underpinned by a commitment to coordinated action that promotes synergies, avoids duplication of effort and promotes closer cooperation with United Nations entities, the NGO Panel for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, academics, Member States and other relevant key stakeholders. The task force has mapped the study's recommendations to assist with tracking activities and results at the global, regional and national levels and, based on this work, has developed a joint road map. It has also contributed to the reports of the Special Representative.

25. In December, the Special Representative represented the task force at the presentation of a report by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants (A/75/183) in which the Special Rapporteur identified good practices for ending detention of children for migration-related reasons.

26. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to re-engage in child justice reforms and bring about sustainable long-term change. UNICEF data indicate that at least 31 countries have released children from detention due to concerns about the spread of COVID-19. This raises a question: If it was safe to release children from detention during the pandemic, why were they detained in the first place? The Special Representative intends to use this opening to emphasize that deprivation of liberty must be truly a measure of last resort

for all children, and to advocate for the use of alternatives to detention, such as diversion and restorative justice.

E. Engaging with children

27. The Special Representative holds regular meetings with children during her country visits and regional activities and in the context of intergovernmental processes in Geneva and New York. In July 2020, she hosted a discussion with children and young activists who were participating in the high-level political forum on sustainable development to present their work, which included shadow reports for their respective Government's voluntary national review.

28. The Special Representative supports work on empowering and safeguarding children as human rights defender. She provided technical input to Child Rights Connect in the development of a toolkit to provide guidance to States and other stakeholders on how to ensure that national laws, policies and practices allow children to fully and safely exercise their rights as human rights defenders.

29. In October, the Special Representative participated in the 2020 Jamboree on the Air-Jamboree on the Internet (JOTA-JOTI), the largest online Scout event, aimed at reaching millions of children. The event brought together young participants from all regions, providing an opportunity for discussions on topics related to children's protection from violence. In November, she participated in an interactive dialogue with 13 children and young people from the Philippines who shared their experiences and showcased actions they were taking to mitigate the risks of violence against children during the pandemic.

III. Impact of COVID-19 on violence against children

A. Situation before the pandemic

30. Even before the pandemic, the world was not on track to achieve target 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals, to eradicate all forms of violence against children by 2030. Figures published in the *Global Status Report on Preventing Violence 2020* indicate that three in four children (about 300 million children) in the age range of 2 to 4 years old regularly suffer physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers every year, approximately one in four children under the age of 5 lives with a mother who is a victim of intimate partner violence, and, globally, it is estimated that emotional abuse is experienced by just over one in every three children.⁷ One in five women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually abused as a child.⁸

31. Yet even these numbers do not give a full global picture and are likely to be an underestimation of the magnitude of the problem, as reporting and monitoring systems are weak and challenges exist in data collection. Furthermore, the findings published in the *Global Status Report* indicated that laws against violence affecting children were widely enacted but often inadequately enforced, and that although many countries had mechanisms to support national violence-prevention work, few had plans that were fully funded and that included measurable targets.⁹

⁷ See www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/violence-prevention/global-status-report-on-violence-against-children-2020, pp. 8 and 16.

⁸ See www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment.

⁹ See www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/violence-prevention/global-status-report-on-violence-against-children-2020, p. xi.

B. Harmful impact of the pandemic on children, in particular vulnerable children, worldwide

32. The challenges of ending violence against children were already immense before COVID-19 struck. The direct impact of the pandemic and mitigation measures adopted in response are further undermining implementation of the 2030 Agenda. What began as a health crisis risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis.¹⁰

33. The pandemic and the mitigation measures adopted in response have increased the risk of children experiencing or being exposed to violence at home due to school closures, confinement, movement restrictions, disruption in the provision of already limited child protection services, and added family stresses related to job loss, isolation and anxieties over health and finances.

34. UNICEF reported that violence prevention and response services had been disrupted in 104 countries.¹¹ It also reported that, at the height of the lockdowns, one third of the world's schoolchildren were unable to access remote learning, and school closures affected almost 90 per cent of students around the world.¹²

35. During the pandemic, widespread digitalization and increased unsupervised Internet use by children has exacerbated online sexual violence, exploitation and cyberbullying. The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) has noted that its law enforcement partners reported increased online activity by those seeking child-abuse material.

36. The COVID-19 pandemic has harmed children's mental well-being. In consultations, children expressed that they felt unsafe, insecure, scared, lonely and isolated. Toxic stress and anxiety are known to have negative and long-lasting effects on children's mental health, including sleep and eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. At the same time, approximately 70 per cent of countries surveyed by the World Health Organization between June and August reported that mental health services for children and adolescents had been disrupted by the pandemic.¹³ In a recent report, *Hidden Scars: How Violence Harms the Mental Health of Children*,¹⁴ the Special Representative highlighted cost-effective, evidence-based interventions that could support Member States' responses to the impact the pandemic had had on children's mental health and well-being.

37. The medium- and longer-term socioeconomic crisis caused by COVID-19 will increase child poverty.¹⁵ Poverty is a driver of many forms of violence; the risks of child marriage, child labour, child sexual exploitation and child trafficking have all increased, as has child recruitment into criminal, armed, violent and extremist groups. The International Labour Organization has reported that a 1 percentage point increase in poverty leads to at least a 0.7 per cent increase in child labour in certain countries. The COVID-19 pandemic poses risks of backtracking on the progress that has been made in decreasing child labour over the past 20 years.¹⁶ UNFPA estimates that an additional 13 million child marriages may take place over the next 10 years.¹⁷ In short, millions of children and young people will be

¹⁰ See https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-04/Covid_Children_Key_Messages.pdf.

¹¹ See www.unicef.org/reports/protecting-children-from-violence-covid-19-disruptions-in-prevention-and-response-services-2020.

¹² See www.unicef.org/press-releases/classrooms-half-worlds-schoolchildren-remain-closed-unicef-and-eu-urge-countries and <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

¹³ See www.who.int/news/item/05-10-2020-covid-19-disrupting-mental-health-services-in-most-countries-who-survey.

¹⁴ United Nations publication, 2020.

¹⁵ See www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/world-bank-chief-warns-extreme-poverty-could-surge-by-100-mn/ar-BB18cPtr.

¹⁶ See www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_747421.pdf.

¹⁷ See www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital.

affected by the economic impact of the pandemic, with those in vulnerable situations hardest hit.

C. Mitigation responses

38. Several countries have ensured that child protection, social protection and mental health services are identified as essential and life-saving and continue to be provided and accessible to all children even during lockdowns, quarantines and other types of restrictions.

39. Where lockdowns and stay-at-home orders severely undermined children's access to services, one approach has been to issue special guidance for social workers undertaking home visits and other face-to-face direct contact with service users and others in community settings. Other countries mobilized local and multisectoral coordination networks to monitor the impact of the pandemic on essential services and adapt them accordingly.

40. A number of States introduced or strengthened the capacity of helplines and services on gender-based violence to respond to survivors of violence who may be caught in situations of lockdown with their abusers and to witnesses of such violence. Such initiatives have been complemented by awareness-raising campaigns to address the concern that the reduction of school and recreational services would limit reporting of violence and put children at risk.

41. Parents and caregivers have been provided with practical support on how to talk about the pandemic with children, how to manage their own mental health and the mental health of their children, and tools to help support their children's learning.

42. Efforts have also been made to inform children in a child-friendly, age-appropriate manner on the effects of and responses to COVID-19. Some States have developed innovative ways to listen to and learn from children about their experience of the current responses to COVID-19. Meaningful child-participation initiatives underline the important role that children and adolescents can play in facing the challenges raised by the pandemic, for example by volunteering their help within communities, or combating stigmatization, xenophobia and discrimination online.

43. In countries that included school closures as part of their response, many education providers took action to mitigate the negative impact by scaling up options for distance learning. This has included the use of televised lessons and digital platforms. There have also been initiatives to ensure that educators can still report and follow up on cases of violence, including cyberbullying.

44. In tandem with this, important action has been taken to provide messaging on safe and responsible behaviour online and to support children, parents and caregivers in developing digital safety skills and resilience. Increasing the accessibility and affordability of Internet access for children – especially in places under lockdown in order to provide education, facilitate work and disseminate public information on COVID-19 – is a key to maintaining children's learning, support and play.

45. Lockdowns and loss or reduction of employment has reduced the incomes of households with children with an attendant increased risk of violence. During the pandemic, many countries introduced new or scaled-up social protection services. As of November, the International Labour Organization reported that at least 72 countries had strengthened social protection for children and families as a response to the COVID-19 situation, including by setting up new child grant programmes, increasing the value of existing child grants and extending the coverage of targeted cash transfer programmes.¹⁸

D. Building back better

46. The pandemic exposed how inequality, discrimination and social disparities have devastating consequences for children. As planning for the recovery from the pandemic accelerates, Governments should seize the opportunity to build back better in the area of

¹⁸ See www.social-protection.org.

services for the health, development and protection of children, and reassess priorities in terms of advancing human development, reducing inequalities and including children as part of the solution.

47. States should reformulate social priorities and develop a strategic plan for the future of public services for children that reduces inequalities and assures sustainability, resilience and readiness for any future national or global crisis.

48. The provision of social protection, including universal health coverage and child grants, must be assured to help poor and other vulnerable families to meet their basic needs, in good times and bad. Coordination should be strengthened within Governments and within relevant multi-stakeholder partnerships, such as Alliance 8.7, the Global Education Initiative, and the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children.

49. Efforts to prevent, identify, mitigate and remediate child labour should be redoubled, with special attention paid to the increased risk of child trafficking, and child and early marriage, arising from the pandemic.

IV. Children taking action

50. The work of the Special Representative is based on a holistic and child rights-centred approach that emphasizes the role of children as agents of change and their capacity for leadership in building a world free from violence.

51. Today, the world is in a new era of child engagement where children are taking action against violence, advancing positive change, working as partners with adults and young people, supporting their peers and being part of the solution. Children are more informed, more aware of their rights and how to claim them, and are increasingly expressing their concerns and opinions about the world they live in now and the future they will inherit.

52. In 2020, the Office of the Special Representative embarked on a mapping exercise to learn more about how children are engaging in the world and contributing to, and being actors for, change. As of December, 245 case studies from 83 countries had been reviewed and in-depth interviews with members of 36 organizations working at the global, regional and national levels conducted.

A. Increased visibility and participation of children

53. Information and communications technologies have transformed the way children build knowledge, express opinions, engage with peers and create communities, and give them access to new data and expertise. Across countries and regions, children have connected digitally with multiple experts, including United Nations representatives, researchers and government officials.¹⁹ Organizations have worked to make children more aware of the challenges they face in their communities so they can take action. Many of these children have led pilot projects in their communities on environmental protection, peace, protection from sexual assault and prevention of child marriage.

54. The impact of COVID-19 has further increased the need to have access to, and skills to work with, digital means. Some examples from countries in Africa and Latin America show how organizations are providing devices directly or transferring funds through their partner organizations so children can pay for connectivity. In Bangladesh, Jordan, Malawi, Pakistan and Tunisia a digital skills movement led by young people has taught tens of thousands of young people to code and create an online learning environment.²⁰

55. As many offline models were forced to adapt and go online during the pandemic, children's digital engagement and innovative use of the online world increased. The COVID-19 situation has also presented more opportunities for children to connect with decision makers at the regional and global levels by participating in discussions in a cost-effective

¹⁹ Information received from Green Hope Foundation.

²⁰ MentorNations, interview with founding member, 16 October 2020.

manner, without needing to travel or miss school.²¹ In Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America, a child-safe social community platform (PopJam) was made available for children under 12, demonstrating growing empowerment among this young target group. Preliminary research shows the young users are more aware of their digital privacy and protection, with a growing sense of their rights as applied in the digital world.²²

56. When children have access to the Internet, they can be instrumental in delivering trustworthy information. Organizations that participated in the mapping pointed out that action to raise awareness was largely driven by children, as they were generally more educated than their parents about the issues and had the literacy to deliver accurate information. This has been instrumental in reaching vulnerable children and the children who are hardest to reach.

B. Children acting to advance change

1. Children working side by side with decision makers

57. Children are increasingly partnering with adults to channel their engagement in a positive and constructive manner. When empowered by decision makers and governments, children can become important agents of change. As one 17-year-old activist stated: “We can do more. We know we can do more. Just listen to us. Children can influence change.”²³

58. In Kosovo,²⁴ children have taken part in debates with authorities, drafting messages advocating for participation in local budget planning, equal education opportunities for all children and better health care.²⁵ In Iceland, new legislative and policy proposals to promote children’s prosperity make the active involvement of children a priority; children’s views on the proposals were sought by means of a wide-ranging consultation through schools.

59. In Chile, Ghana, Malaysia and South Africa, after a six-week training on gender-based violence, human rights and national-level advocacy, adolescent girls themselves trained adults in their communities and presented petitions to government representatives.²⁶ All over the world, girls are leading and owning their advocacy campaigns, which has resulted in positive change for their communities, and in further engagement from girls.

60. In Ukraine, on the occasion of the first International Day to Protect Education from Attack, children were able to share their ideas on safe, high-quality education with government officials and received insights from the ministry responsible for education on current and future work.²⁷ In the State of Palestine, acting as part of the child-led monitoring and reporting groups and as human rights defenders, children in various governorates collected and analysed data on child rights, drafted reports, developed initiatives and held sessions with decision makers where they presented their research findings.²⁸

²¹ World Vision, interview with staff member from the global team, 27 October 2020.

²² Super Awesome, interview with staff member, 28 October 2020.

²³ Cheverly, representative of Team Positive, Philippines, Oriental Mindoro/Luzon Island cluster, contribution during the digital dialogue held at the Ako Para Sa Bata Conference, December 2020.

²⁴ All references to Kosovo in the present document should be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

²⁵ Save the Children International. See www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1GILz7jTTgzUsi9JF8XJvsL1JUXMEkO7j&ll=29.65013497081036%2C-16.95657958423294&z=2.

²⁶ World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, interview with staff member at the global level, 5 August 2020.

²⁷ Save the Children International. See www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1GILz7jTTgzUsi9JF8XJvsL1JUXMEkO7j&ll=29.65013497081036%2C-16.95657958423294&z=2.

²⁸ Save the Children International. See www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1GILz7jTTgzUsi9JF8XJvsL1JUXMEkO7j&ll=29.65013497081036%2C-16.95657958423294&z=2.

2. Intergenerational dialogues: children and adults coming up with solutions together

61. Intergenerational learning can go both ways: children are guided by adults and adults are learning from successful child-led actions. Intergenerational dialogues to find solutions together have taken place in Bolivia (Plurinational State of) and Israel, and the State of Palestine.²⁹ In Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Spain and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), an adolescent-led movement is encouraging young girls to create content for 10-to-12-year-olds around gender-based violence and children's rights.³⁰ The project has been so successful that adult-led organizations and local governments are requesting the creators to adapt the methodology to the adult world for replication in their own communities.

62. At the beginning of the pandemic, elected student representatives in Africa and Europe, along with young activists from marginalized communities, including former child labourers, jointly created the Justice for Every Child campaign, calling for global financial commitments to protect the almost 20 per cent of children living on \$2 or less per day from the short- and medium-term impacts of COVID-19.³¹ The campaign now has over 50 youth-led partner organizations, ranging from international networks and national bodies to local grass-roots groups, tackling the impact of the pandemic on the front lines in refugee camps, informal settlements and rural villages.

3. Children taking action in their communities

63. In Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Romania and Sierra Leone, children are being trained in data collection, which has also proven to be an empowering experience: their contributions are acknowledged and they share a sense of belonging.³² In Scotland, children launched an online survey to collect other children's recommendations during the pandemic.³³

64. In African, Asian and Latin American countries, young girls were mobilized to prevent gender inequalities and avoid early and forced marriage in their communities. These young girls challenged pervasive gender norms and provided new role models for young girls in rural areas. In Malawi, a group of girls helped change national legislation by uniting voices to outlaw child marriage and other forms of sexual violence.³⁴ In Guatemala, a group of girls led the process to create a national violence observatory centre for reporting cases of violence against girls and women.³⁵ In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, child advisory committees for the Government act as bridge-builders on protection issues between child victims of violence and the ombudsperson.³⁶ In Bangladesh, India, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda and the United States, girls created an online application to interview other girls and identify, among other things, the reasons why violence reporting systems were not successful.³⁷ Technology Enabled Girl Ambassadors have conducted about 17,000 interviews to date, informing programmes aimed at addressing gender-based violence in their communities.

65. In Cameroon, girls are being trained to become community leaders, and they in turn reach out to out-of-school children, who are among the most marginalized.³⁸ In Sierra Leone, youth leaders are receiving training on mental health, psychological first aid and violence reporting.³⁹ They return to their communities with the goal of helping other children.

²⁹ Information received from ACT2gether, 1 September 2020.

³⁰ Tremendas, interview with the founder, 6 November 2020.

³¹ Information received from All-Africa Student Union, Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions, European Students' Union, Commonwealth Students' Association and 100 Million, 17 August 2020.

³² World Vision, interview with staff member from the global team, 27 October 2020.

³³ Child Rights Connect, interview with staff member at the global level, 14 April 2020.

³⁴ Rise Up. See <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/when-children-take-lead-10-child-participation-approaches-tackle-violence>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ ACT2gether, interview with staff member at the global level, 23 September 2020.

³⁷ Girl Effect, interview with staff member at the global level, 18 June 2020.

³⁸ Children for Peace, interview with staff member, 22 May 2020.

³⁹ Restless Development Sierra Leone, interview with staff member, 2 November 2020.

66. In Uganda, a local organization has helped children deal with mental health challenges created by isolation and domestic violence at home. Through a peer-to-peer mentoring programme, it has helped resolve cases of anxiety in children and in girls worried about gender stereotypes and their education.⁴⁰

67. In Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, and the State of Palestine, young leaders in the field of medicine produced videos explaining the pandemic.⁴¹ The video reached approximately 5,000 children and contained practical tips on how to stay safe, including in relation to mental health. In Uganda, an organization established a COVID-19 emergency relief fund for safeguarding children during lockdown, involving 12 adolescent girls in developing strategies for raising awareness among residents in six villages about violence against children and about sexual and reproductive health.⁴² In Cambodia, children are raising awareness by producing short videos on hand-washing and information on COVID-19 prevention.⁴³ In Yemen, children are helping deliver accurate information by visiting isolated households.⁴⁴

68. In some countries, radio is being used by children to disseminate their messages. In South Sudan, to ensure that the messages reached those without access to a radio, speakers were mounted on motorcycle taxis serving strategic locations in hard-to-reach populations in Juba.⁴⁵ In Malawi and Rwanda, girls have been reaching millions through national radio shows.⁴⁶ In Rwanda, girl journalists interviewed a spokesperson from Rwanda Biomedical Centre and produced a six-minute package for Radio Rwanda on the COVID-19 pandemic and how to stay safe.

69. In the Central African Republic, Mali and South Sudan, children are providing reliable information through adolescent-led radio shows broadcast through large speakers in isolated areas to counter misconceptions and rumours that have been making the local population less inclined to follow recommended measures related to COVID-19.⁴⁷

70. In Africa, adolescents and young people launched a regional campaign for free Internet, advocating for equal quality access to online education for all.⁴⁸ The purpose of the campaign is to establish a platform for students in Africa to engage in dialogue with each other, discuss the advantages and challenges of accessibility for all during COVID-19, and propose solutions for sustainable and quality digital education for all.

71. In the Central African Republic, Mali and South Sudan, children in conflict zones are using radio to raise issues relating to the peace processes. The methodological approach has been to involve such children in the analysis of the specific situations each community is going through. The approach has been adapted during the pandemic to address children's concerns about COVID-19, given that it was a pressing issue among the children's peers and communities.⁴⁹

72. In Sierra Leone, a youth-led organization deployed a team of 25 adolescent volunteers to assess the compliance levels of small business owners with COVID-19 prevention and control measures and to promote knowledge and understanding of the disease among the public.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ Information received from Loving Hands Children and Women Organization, 16 August 2020.

⁴¹ International Young Catholic Students, interview with staff member at the global level, 10 November 2020.

⁴² Information received from Serving Lives Under Marginalization, 14 August 2020.

⁴³ Save the Children International. See www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1GILz7jTTgzUsi9JF8XJvsL1JUXMEkO7j&ll=29.65013497081036%2C-16.95657958423294&z=2.

⁴⁴ World Organization of the Scout Movement. See www.scout.org/node/583335.

⁴⁵ Information received from Search for Common Ground, 22 September 2020.

⁴⁶ Girl Effect, interview with staff member at the global level, 18 June 2020.

⁴⁷ Information received from Search for Common Ground, 22 September 2020.

⁴⁸ International Young Catholic Students, interview with staff member at the global level, 19 November 2020.

⁴⁹ Information received from Search for Common Ground, 22 September 2020.

⁵⁰ World Organization of the Scout Movement. See www.scout.org/fr/sierra-leone-scouts-covid-research.

73. In Lebanon, young champions are adapting their peacebuilding initiative by mapping local tensions emerging in relation to COVID-19 and working with adult partners to design strategic communications activities to address them.⁵¹

4. Peer-to-peer engagement: children advancing change together

74. Peer-to-peer support has been important during COVID-19 confinement and lockdowns. From informal settlements in Liberia to the poorer districts in Peru, this interaction has been instrumental not only in providing connection in a time of isolation but also for youth-led groups formulating advocacy demands based on the experiences of COVID-19 of their marginalized peers.⁵² Julieta, a 17-year-old activist from Chile, noted the power of young people working with each other, particularly “when we realize that we don’t necessarily have to look ‘up’ to find role models: these can easily be in your classroom. There’s a different level of connection, and different kinds of trust.”⁵³

75. In the United Kingdom, a theatre company working with a small group of adolescents on advancing change through drama encouraged adolescents to document their experiences. This led to some 3,000 adolescents from the United Kingdom and 14 other States and areas⁵⁴ to contribute their experiences of the pandemic.⁵⁵ The children described how their involvement in those activities helped them to stay creative and keep making connections with the outside world.

76. In Brazil, children and adolescents have been participating in virtual gatherings to discuss issues related to both physical and psychological violence, and collectively suggest strategies to prevent violence. They are also producing podcasts and videos to encourage other children to exercise preventive and safety measures in their day-to-day lives.⁵⁶

77. In India, one organization working with children in street situations trains such children on how to inform their peers and how to identify their needs and vulnerabilities. Once trained, the peer leaders visit communities and provide other children with training in the area of hygiene and on how to reach out for support if they are victims of violence. The peer leaders conducted a quick survey during the onset of pandemic, which provided information on the mental health conditions of children in street situations and on instances of abuse occurring due to the lockdown.

78. In Panama, members of one child-led group are helping to prevent violence by encouraging their peers not to join street gangs in their communities. They develop various cultural, educational and personal development activities in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development.⁵⁷

79. In Bangladesh, India and the Syrian Arab Republic, children are educating their peers and their parents on sexual violence and child marriage.⁵⁸

80. In 17 States⁵⁹ and Kosovo, children in working situations organized advisory committee meetings on a regular basis for two years, to advocate to improve working conditions for themselves and their peers. The children’s regular participation in groups, interaction with other children and use of participatory analysis and action planning tools, as well as encouragement and support from facilitators from non-governmental organizations, increased the confidence of members to speak up in public settings to share their views and

⁵¹ Information received from Search for Common Ground, 22 September 2020.

⁵² Information received from 100 Million, 17 August 2020.

⁵³ Tremendas, interview with founder, 6 November 2020.

⁵⁴ Austria, Canada, Croatia, France, Ireland, Kenya, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, the United States, Thailand and Ukraine, and the Channel Islands.

⁵⁵ Company Three Theatre, interview with founder, 15 September 2020.

⁵⁶ Information received from Rede Não Bata, Eduque, 26 August 2020.

⁵⁷ Los Imparables. See www.concausa2030.com/espanol/proyecto/los-imparables-prevenir-es-mejor/.

⁵⁸ Information received from Green Hope Foundation, 18 August 2020.

⁵⁹ Bangladesh, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Chile, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Nepal, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Tanzania (United Republic of) and Zambia.

experiences and express their demands. The children's participation also contributed to improvements in their relationships with their peers, families, teachers and communities.⁶⁰

81. In Bangladesh and the Philippines, the Ticket to Life Project helps children in street situations to join Scouts groups. Adolescents and young people reach out to children in street situations and help them enrol in school. These children have become group leaders and the programme will be extended to other countries, primarily in Africa.⁶¹

82. Children are also helping to provide referrals to support services when needed, informing other children about mechanisms for reporting violence. In Spain, the operator of a national child helpline that has been active for 27 years highlighted in the mapping how influential peer support was with regard to preventing and reporting violence, stating that a significant majority of users had been introduced or referred to the helpline by a friend.⁶² The operators noted that children received most of their support from their friends and peers. In Chile, the operator of a digital chat-based helpline for child victims of violence and discrimination, which focuses on, but is not limited to, LGBT+ communities, stated that most children were referred to the helpline by a friend or peer in a similar situation.⁶³ The helpline supports close to 3,000 children annually.

83. In 12 countries in Latin America,⁶⁴ an adolescent network created to put forward solutions for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals⁶⁵ resulted in a permanent support system for children. When children are involved in advocacy work, not only are they empowered to educate one another on violence not being normal, but the advocacy network itself becomes a source of support. They interact with different cultures within the groups and see the world through their peers' eyes.

5. Children expressing themselves through art and other means

84. Art, crafts and other means of expression empower children to address violence, recover and move forward, when they are victims of violence. In Honduras, one child-led intervention uses theatre to help prevent gender-based violence, a critical problem faced by girls in the country.⁶⁶ Children who have participated have stated that they are generating a positive impact in communities to ensure that girls and women, including young women, can prevent various forms of violence. Their work focuses on using theatre to transmit why it is important to report violence, raise one's voice, seek justice and stop the continuum of victimization.

85. In Guatemala, a girls-led organization is working with adolescent mothers who have been victims of violence to find recovery through crafts and simple jewellery-making while working together on their self-esteem and personal growth, to help with their reintegration into society.⁶⁷ In India, one group organized a poster-making competition to encourage children to describe the different forms of domestic violence, how to recognize it and how to act against it.⁶⁸ The winning posters were then used to raise awareness among the wider population.

86. In Luxembourg, one organization aiming to promote a safer, more responsible and more positive use of digital technology among children and young people invited children to draw something they thought should not be shared on the Internet. Over half of the children

⁶⁰ Save the Children Canada, Terre des Hommes and Kindernothilfe, interview with global team for the initiative Time to Talk, 14 October 2020.

⁶¹ World Organization of the Scout Movement, interview with staff members at the global level, 20 October 2020.

⁶² Fundación ANAR, interview with staff members, 14 October 2020.

⁶³ Fundación Todo Mejora, interview with staff members, 12 November 2020.

⁶⁴ Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

⁶⁵ Concausa, interview with staff member, 23 October 2020.

⁶⁶ Concausa. See www.concausa2030.com/espanol/proyecto/prevencion-de-violencia-de-genero-con-teatro/.

⁶⁷ Niñas Ayudando a Niñas. See www.concausa2030.com/espanol/proyecto/ninas-ayudando-ninas/.

⁶⁸ Information received from Breakthrough India, 17 September 2020.

who responded drew violent and scary scenes, and several submitted drawings related to sex.⁶⁹

87. Over 150 children from different regions participated in a virtual exhibition through an interactive website featuring what children had to say about how COVID-19 had affected their lives, including paintings, videos, articles, audio clips and recommendations on moving forward.⁷⁰ Over 3,000 adolescents in 15 States and areas⁷¹ documented their experience of the pandemic to create a time capsule. Adult leaders of the initiative have seen how drama and documenting children's experience of the pandemic have given children a sense of belonging and a connection with adolescents living in other countries.

88. In several countries, children's poems and illustrations have been used to put together stories about positiveness; similar initiatives were undertaken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guatemala and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).⁷² In Somalia, children used radio to share how their lives had been affected by COVID-19. In the State of Palestine, children produced videos of their experiences, and shared messages with other children.⁷³ Girls in Bangladesh, India, Malawi, Nigeria and the United States, prepared video reports in which they answered a set of 10 questions each week with a view to finding commonalities across borders.⁷⁴

89. In Senegal, a group of girls requested adults to help them to create a video on the impact of COVID-19 on the incidence of child marriage. In the Philippines, children developed posters to transmit solidarity messages with regard to COVID-19.⁷⁵ In Ecuador, music was used to help children overcome the sadness caused by losing loved ones due to COVID-19. In Africa, adolescents have been creating videos of the Jerusalem dance, to creatively raise awareness about the climate change emergency and ensure it is not put to the side during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to call on children and young people to protect the environment.⁷⁶

V. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Moving forward: children as part of the solution in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals while building back better

90. **Children are part of the solution. They are connecting peers with essential services, proposing ways forward, collaborating with their communities and supporting their peers. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for children to help shape programmes and interventions regarding their safety and well-being and move towards a world free from all forms of violence against children.**

91. **To promote a culture of constructive civic engagement, and to foster efforts to work with children to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, build back better and address all forms of violence against children, the Special Representative makes the following evidence-based recommendations for governments at the national and local levels:**

⁶⁹ Information received from Service national de la jeunesse, 27 August 2020.

⁷⁰ Arigatou International. See <https://arigatouinternational.faithinactionexhibition.org/>.

⁷¹ Austria, Canada, Croatia, France, Ireland, Kenya, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, Thailand and Ukraine, and the Channel Islands.

⁷² Child Rights Connect, interview with staff member at the global level, 14 April 2020.

⁷³ Save the Children International. See www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1GILz7jTTgzUsi9JF8XJvsL1JUXMEkO7j&ll=29.65013497081036%2C-16.95657958423294&z=2.

⁷⁴ Girl Effect, interview with staff member at the global level, 18 June 2020.

⁷⁵ Save the Children International. See www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1GILz7jTTgzUsi9JF8XJvsL1JUXMEkO7j&ll=29.65013497081036%2C-16.95657958423294&z=2.

⁷⁶ International Young Catholic Students, interview with staff member at the global level, 19 November 2020.

(a) Identify successful child-led actions and help scale them up. Worldwide, children and young people are already taking action to address violence against children. Children need to be provided with training and capacity-building, and with technical knowledge to understand the root causes of violence;

(b) Invest in children's networks and aim for models that have peer-to-peer engagement as a founding principle. Decision makers should be encouraged to work with children in identifying strategies for reaching the most vulnerable, in building strong peer networks, in transmitting relevant support and referral systems to both prevent and respond to violence, and to generally aim for models that encourage peer connections, both online and offline;

(c) Reach out and partner with children and young people who are already actively engaged in civic processes, to work on solutions for building back better;

(d) Address the digital divide by increasing the accessibility and affordability of Internet access for all children, especially those most at risk of being left behind;

(e) Listen to children and include them in the development of social and child protection systems. They can provide valuable inputs regarding their needs and possible responses.

B. Looking ahead

92. As the world begins to see the end of the global pandemic and to plan for recovery, it is crucial to seize the opportunity presented to build a better world and to realize the vision set out in the 2030 Agenda of a world free from fear and from violence. The far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 crisis call for children and their right to physical and mental health, education and protection to be prioritized in the pandemic response and recovery planning. Building back better cannot be just another slogan. It must have a real, positive impact on children's lives that is achieved by rebuilding and sustaining the protective environment around children so that they are both empowered and safe.

93. The COVID-19 pandemic is unique in its global reach and the scale of its impact; however, experts have warned that we can expect more such pandemics in the future. Now is therefore a key moment to ensure that lessons are learned from the violence-related aspects of the first lockdowns so that they can be integrated into emergency preparedness, including through the development of protocols for sustaining essential service delivery and the protection of children's rights.

94. Children urgently need sustainably financed social protection systems linked to properly resourced child protection services. To this end, it must be ensured that in the immediate response to the pandemic and in the rebuilding phase, child protection is recognized as a life-saving and essential service, along with health, early childhood development, mental health and education. The response should be built on a solid foundation of permanent, inclusive social protection systems, including universal child grants and universal health coverage, that will protect children and their caregivers from economic risks.

95. Building back better is an opportunity to push for a strong mobilization of all key stakeholders, including children, at the global, regional and national levels, to keep the promise contained in the 2030 Agenda and end the pandemic of violence against children. This cannot be done effectively without children's perspectives and views or without involving them as part of the solution in ending violence against children, at all stages of the process.

96. The world is at a crucial point with regard to the lives of a generation of children who will be most affected by COVID-19. All must be done to ensure that children do not become the main victims of the pandemic, and to build a better world where their rights are promoted and protected and where no child is left behind.