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**Promotion and protection of the rights of children:
promotion and protection of the rights of children**

Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

Summary

The present report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [64/146](#). The report covers the period from August 2019 to July 2020 and serves to describe trends, issues of concern and progress made towards ending violence against children, as well as the main achievements realized under the mandate. The report is focused in particular on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on violence against children and concludes with recommendations for the way forward, including on the importance of involving children as part of the solution.

* [A/75/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. In the present report, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children reviews developments that she has promoted at the global, regional and national levels and provides an overview of the results achieved. The report covers the first year of the current mandate holder, Najat Maalla M'jid, who took up her position on 1 July 2019.

2. Guided by General Assembly resolution [62/141](#), by which the Assembly established the mandate, the Special Representative is a global, independent advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children. In its resolution [72/245](#), the Assembly reaffirmed its support for the work of the then Special Representative, recognizing the progress she had achieved and the consolidated partnerships she had promoted, and welcomed her efforts to mainstream the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children (see [A/61/299](#)).

3. In accordance with the vision outlined for the way forward in her previous report ([A/74/259](#)), the current Special Representative developed a two-year road map for the work to be carried out under the mandate after consultation with key stakeholders. The road map serves to identify three strategic priorities: accelerating progress towards target 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals and other related Goals; ensuring that efforts to combat all forms of violence against children are included in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and listening to and involving children in the work of the mandate.

4. A new sense of urgency emerged at the beginning of the year with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and its unprecedented global impact. The pandemic and the measures taken in response to it have increased the risk of children being exposed to violence, especially those who were already in vulnerable situations before the pandemic. It has also reduced the capacity of essential services to effectively prevent and respond to violence and undermined progress achieved across a range of Sustainable Development Goals.

5. The present report sets out the action undertaken by the mandate holder to achieve its priorities and address the new challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The response to the pandemic in particular required the activities planned under the mandate to be modified rapidly and adapted to the new reality. The report concludes with recommendations for the way forward in ensuring that ending violence against children is a priority both during and after the pandemic, as the international community embarks on the decade of action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

II. Mobilizing accelerated action to prevent and end all forms of violence against children

A. Leaving no child behind

6. At the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2019, the Special Representative, in cooperation with a wide range of partners, including children themselves, presented the report entitled *Keeping the Promise: Ending Violence against Children by 2030*. According to the report, violence against children remains hidden and pervasive, undermining progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

7. Every year, at least 1 billion children – half of the world’s children – experience violence. Children account for 30 per cent of those who are trafficked, with the sexual exploitation of victims being the main driver of human trafficking. Three in every four children under the age of 5 years have experienced violent discipline at the hands of caregivers. Almost one third of school students were bullied by their peers at least once in the past month.

8. According to the report, although there is evidence of some progress in terms of the protection of children from all forms of violence, it is too slow and there is a need for a greater sense of urgency for action. The most significant challenges to ending violence against children are set out in the report: weak implementation and enforcement of laws and policies; lack of resources and of an integrated approach to providing services to children; significant data gaps; the need to scale up partnerships; and the need to empower children to participate meaningfully in efforts to prevent and address violence.

9. One year on, those challenges persist. That was underlined by the findings of the World Health Organization (WHO) *Global Status Report on Preventing Violence against Children 2020*, to which the Special Representative contributed. According to the report, which contains input from over 1,000 decision makers in 155 countries, the efforts of Member States are insufficient to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal targets related to violence against children.

10. WHO indicates in the report that, although 88 per cent of countries have key laws in place to protect children against violence, less than half (47 per cent) reported that the laws were being strongly enforced. A majority of countries (83 per cent) have national data on violence against children, but only 21 per cent use the data to set baselines and national targets to prevent and respond to violence against children. Around 80 per cent of countries have national plans of action and policies but only one fifth have plans that are fully funded or have measurable targets.

11. Children face violence in many forms and in many places, both online and offline. A child can be the target of violence, or can witness or be exposed to it. Different forms of violence can occur together, just as one form can lead to another.

12. Some children are at heightened risk of experiencing violence. They include children living in alternative care; children without a legal identity; children living or working on the streets; children with disabilities; children living in poverty; children from ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender children; and children who are on the move as migrants, refugees or as internally displaced persons. It is also essential to recognize the gender dimension of violence against children and the way in which gender-based stereotypes, power imbalances, inequalities and discrimination create different risks for children.

13. Furthermore, there is a need to recognize the links between violence against women and violence against children. Experiencing child maltreatment and witnessing partner abuse in the home as a child, for example, have consistently been demonstrated to be risk factors for becoming both a perpetrator and a victim of sexual and intimate partner violence as an adult. It is evident that exposure to childhood violence has an intergenerational impact.

14. Violence has a devastating and lifelong impact on the health and well-being of children. The Special Representative has placed particular emphasis on the need to prevent and address the harm that violence does to children’s mental health (see [A/HRC/43/39](#)). The consequences of violence include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, anxiety, substance use, sleep and eating disorders, and suicide. There is an urgent need for more action to prevent and respond to the threat posed by violence to children’s mental health. Yet there are few

services tailored to children's needs, even though mental health is consistently identified by children themselves as a major concern.

15. To support Member States in addressing the challenge, the Special Representative is preparing a report entitled "Hidden scars: how violence harms the mental health of children", to be issued in October 2020, that highlights cost-effective, evidence-based interventions to support children's mental health and well-being. The report is informed by the input of experts and various United Nations entities working in the field of child and adolescent mental health, and by the views of children.

16. The Special Representative is concerned that the already staggering numbers of children affected by violence today may be further increased through current disturbing trends that include climate change, protracted conflicts, humanitarian disasters, increasing numbers of children on the move, the misuse of new technologies, the spread of terrorism and violent extremism, and harmful social norms, such as increasing disparities, poverty, social exclusion and discrimination.

17. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated those challenges, as outlined further below. However, the international community was not on track to keep the promise to end violence against children by 2030 even before the disruption caused by the pandemic.

18. Despite the challenges, there is no reason to be fatalistic about the prospects of ending violence against children. Where the issue is prioritized and people work together, it is possible to see progress. Where there is genuine commitment and where there are sufficient resources, it is possible to scale up effective interventions to prevent and respond to violence. It is possible to realize the vision of the 2030 Agenda of a world free from fear and from violence. That principle has guided the Special Representative's advocacy and mobilization initiatives at the global, regional and national levels.

B. Accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

19. Since taking up her mandate, the Special Representative has stressed the centrality of supporting implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the initiative of the Secretary-General on a decade of action and delivery for sustainable development. A key element of that strategic approach is to support Member States in preparing their voluntary national reviews for the high-level political forum on sustainable development. A briefing note was developed for Member States for that purpose, with guidance on how to use their voluntary national review to report on promising practices and initiatives towards preventing and responding to violence against children.¹

20. Although the number of voluntary national reviews noting progress on children's rights, including the right to protection from violence, has steadily increased, most countries do not feature the situation of children prominently in their reports.

21. In July 2020, 47 Member States presented their voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum. Under the framework of "leaving no one behind" Member States proactively invited various stakeholders, including children, into the overall implementation processes for the voluntary national reviews and the Sustainable Development Goals. In June, prior to the high-level political forum,

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

the Special Representative addressed the Group of Friends for Children and the Sustainable Development Goals regarding the need to ensure children's participation in all levels of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including the voluntary national review process.

22. In 2020, the focus of the high-level political forum became “building back better” after COVID-19, while accelerating action and embarking on new pathways to realize the 2030 Agenda. The Special Representative, together with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) co-organized “voluntary national review labs” at the high-level political forum, at which countries from five continents shared promising practices and approaches, highlighting linkages between children's rights, including the right to protection from violence, and effective systems of social protection. Children contributed as experts to the event, with concrete suggestions based on past experiences on how to make voluntary national reviews more child-sensitive and inclusive.

C. Strengthening regional and subregional partnerships

23. During the reporting period, the Special Representative continued to enhance partnerships with regional organizations as strategic allies. Those strong partnerships have helped to place violence against children at the centre of the regional policy agenda, while at the same time enhancing the accountability of States and supporting their national implementation efforts.

24. In Asia, the Special Representative was a keynote speaker at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Conference on Child Online Protection, at which she urged Member States to adopt an integrated cross-sectoral and child rights-based approach that includes children as key actors for their own protection and the protection of others online. She also highlighted the role of the information and communications technology (ICT) sector in mitigating the negative impact digital technologies can have on children. She also participated in a special online meeting on 4 June 2020 on the increased risk to women and children of domestic violence owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, organized by the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children. In collaboration with the UNICEF Regional Office for East Asia and the Pacific, the Special Representative provided technical input for the discussion at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development on the theme “Mitigating impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups in ASEAN”, held online on 10 June 2020. Together with UNICEF, the Special Representative issued a statement endorsing the communiqué from the meeting, which prioritized the rights of children in the response to COVID-19.

25. The Special Representative addressed the twenty-second Pan American Child Congress, at which an action plan on child rights for the period 2020–2023 was adopted. The Congress concluded with the adoption of a declaration in which State members of the Organization of American States reaffirmed their unshakeable commitment to the exercise and protection of the human rights of children and adolescents.² The Special Representative had a second regional dialogue with Governments in the region in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. She also held a dialogue with children and adolescents from the region, in which children had the opportunity to refer to some of the challenges the region is facing in terms of violence and protection.

² CPPNNA/DEC.1 XXII-19. Available at http://sitiosiiin.org/xxii-congreso/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CPNNA_DEC_1_XXII_19.pdf.

26. The Special Representative provided inputs to a study conducted by the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean and participated in the related regional seminar on the presence and use of firearms in schools, which mobilized technical experts working in ministries responsible for children's rights and for security and disarmament. The Special Representative also provided inputs for the development of a strategy by the Caribbean Community for the period 2020–2029 on the prevention of violence against children.

27. The Special Representative participated in the fifteenth session of the Arab Violence against Children Committee, held in Nouakchott on 1 October 2019, at which a decision was adopted that included a commitment to work together with the Special Representative to protect children from all forms of violence. The Committee also decided to prepare the fourth Arab comparative report on the implementation by 2021 of the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children. In collaboration with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the Special Representative was invited to participate as a keynote speaker at the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, but the Forum was postponed owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

28. The Special Representative continued her strong engagement with the Council of Europe and participated as a keynote speaker in a high-level conference to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. She also participated in a plenary debate of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the theme of sexual violence against children, in which she promoted the continued alignment of the Council's work with the Sustainable Development Goals and urged Member States to support the implementation of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016–2021).

29. It is a high priority of the Special Representative to further develop her engagement at the regional level with Africa. To that end, the Special Representative met with the African Union Commissioner for Social Affairs and identified possible joint initiatives on ending violence against children, although the implementation of the agreed actions was temporarily disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

30. The Special Representative also continued to pursue close cooperation with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, including on planning a dedicated session on child protection and COVID-19 during the forthcoming ordinary session of the Committee to be held at the end of the third quarter of 2020. The session will be framed by the policy briefs of the Secretary-General on the impact of COVID-19 on children³ and on the impact of COVID-19 in Africa;⁴ the agenda for action prepared by the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children;⁵ and the recommended action points of the African Committee of Experts on the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child⁶ and the guiding note for Member States issued by the African Committee of Experts.⁷ Other initiatives identified for collaboration include joint missions with the Committee's special rapporteurs and using the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the African Charter on the Rights

³ Available at https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf.

⁴ Available at <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Policy-brief-Impact-of-COVID-19-in-Africa.pdf>.

⁵ Available at https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/2020/agenda_for_action/agenda_iawg_on_vac_27_april_ready_for_launch.pdf.

⁶ www.acerwc.africa/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/11_Action_Points_PDF.pdf Interactive.pdf.

⁷ www.acerwc.africa/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Guiding-Note-on-Child-Protection-during-COVID-19_English.pdf.

and Welfare of the Child to advocate stronger action on violence against children among States parties.

D. Engagement at the country level

31. The most important work on violence against children takes place at the local and national levels, and country visits are therefore of high importance for the Special Representative. Such visits are always planned and implemented in close cooperation with the United Nations country teams. A briefing with a road map is usually provided to the entire United Nations country team at the end of the visit, which is also shared with the respective permanent mission to the United Nations in New York. Since taking up her mandate in July 2019, the Special Representative has undertaken country visits to China, Indonesia, Maldives, Mozambique and Oman. Planned visits to Iceland, Jordan, Lebanon, Lithuania, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia and Vanuatu had to be postponed owing to COVID-19.

32. In Oman, the Special Representative was the keynote speaker at the sixth Arab International Conference on the Prevention of Child Abuse, held in Muscat, Oman, on 17 September 2019, which brought together experts and practitioners working on the prevention of violence against children across the Arab region. She also met senior government officials and national experts to discuss the protection of children from violence and to discuss opportunities to strengthen national systems. She provided technical advice on how to enhance the pilot child protection case management system under development in Oman. In her discussions, the Special Representative focused on the need to ensure that child victims of violence were placed at the centre of all response interventions and that the gathering of evidence in child abuse cases was done in a child-friendly way that minimized their retraumatization.

33. During her visit to China from 19 to 23 October 2019, the Special Representative met senior officials of the Government, including from the Supreme People's Procuratorate, to discuss efforts to strengthen the juvenile justice system, and representatives of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention of China on the collection of data to monitor progress in addressing violence against children. The Special Representative met with the leadership of the Communist Youth League to encourage them in their role of raising awareness of and responding to violence against children, including in the operation of the national child helpline. The Special Representative held an interactive discussion with representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and discussed the challenges and opportunities they faced in the provision of counselling and support services to child victims of violence. In her debriefing with the members of the United Nations country team, the Special Representative encouraged all agencies to actively engage in work on ending violence against children, including through inclusion of the issue in the common country assessment and the Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for China.

34. During her country visit to Mozambique from 24 November to 1 December 2019, the Special Representative met with high-level political leaders, senior government officials, the President of the parliament, children, representatives of civil society, the United Nations country team and donors, and she visited child protection services in order to support national efforts to end violence against children, including harmful practices. The visit provided a strategic opportunity to follow-up on the visit of the Secretary-General to Mozambique. The Special Representative used the opportunity to encourage the Government and the United Nations country team to include efforts to end violence against children in the five-year national strategy for the period 2020–2024, as well as the forthcoming country assessment. She further called for the inclusion of ending violence against children

in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and in the development of the 2020 voluntary national review.

35. One of the purposes of the Special Representative's visit to Indonesia from 2 to 6 March 2020 was to assess progress in the implementation of the national strategy on the elimination of violence against children, 2016–2020. In discussions with relevant ministries, the Special Representative commended Indonesia for its continuing commitment to the protection of children from violence, including the priority assigned to the issue by the President and its incorporation into the national development plan. The need for increased coordination of child protection services at the local level and the allocation of adequate budgets to strengthen the social work force was also highlighted. In her meetings with civil society organizations, she discussed how to translate political commitment into effective action for child protection at the local level while ensuring the inclusion of the most marginalized children, especially in relation to culturally sensitive issues such as early marriage and female genital mutilation or cutting. In several engagements during her visit, the Special Representative met with children and young people who are actively engaged in initiatives to address different dimensions of violence against children.

36. The visit to Maldives from 8 to 10 March 2020 was conducted against the backdrop of the strong commitment of the Government to strengthening the system of child protection in response to several cases of child sexual abuse that had shocked and mobilized public opinion for action. The Special Representative met high-level officials from across the Government. She commended the Government on the recent passing of the Child Rights Protection Act, the Juvenile Justice Act and the intention to reform the child protection and juvenile justice systems based on the new legislation. The Special Representative urged the Government to adopt a child rights-based, cross-sectoral, fully costed and integrated approach to the reform of the systems. Resource and capacity gaps were identified as constraints to moving forward, and the impact of the economic crisis owing to COVID-19 was seen as exacerbating those challenges. Nonetheless, the Government remained committed to continuing the reforms.

E. Increased cooperation with United Nations mechanisms, global alliances and partnerships

37. Effective cooperation between many actors is critical to the prevention of and response to violence against children. Children's lives are not divided thematically to correspond to the mandate of the organizations working on their behalf; they are often exposed to more than one form of violence and in more than one setting. To promote collaboration, the Special Representative continued to make particular use of her mandate to be a bridge-builder and catalyst for change and to promote the establishment and strengthening of partnerships.

38. At the global level in the United Nations system, the Special Representative has institutionalized regular meetings with the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children, the membership of which was extended to a wider group of United Nations entities: International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and WHO, each with a particular mandate regarding aspects of violence against children. The mandate has become integral to a number of other United Nations inter-agency working groups such as the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact and the Working

Group on Hate Speech, and has prompted collaboration with the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth, the Permanent Forum on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Africa.

39. The Special Representative is also a member of the United Nations High-Level Steering Group on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. Through participation in the High-Level Steering Group and the associated system-wide working group on sexual exploitation and abuse, she promotes a child-rights based approach to dealing with sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations personnel. The mandate has, in particular, advocated that staff rules in that area should be fully aligned with international and regional child rights standards, including those prohibiting child marriage among its staff.

40. The Special Representative continued to be actively engaged in the leadership of the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children and serves on its governing Board and Executive Committee. In that capacity, she had a prominent role in contributing to the leaders' statement signed by 22 heads of United Nations entities and international civil society organizations calling for action and pledging support to protect children from violence and abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ The Special Representative also provides technical support to the Global Partnership's Safe to Learn initiative to accelerate action to ensure that children are safe when returning to school, and to promote the creation by the Global Partnership of a knowledge network on data, evidence and research on violence against children.

41. The recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups are a serious form of violence against children that has severe short- and long-term implications. In 2020, the Special Representative produced a report entitled *A Child-Resilience Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism*, which serves to examine key drivers, influences and causal pathways that are specific to children's recruitment by terrorist and violent extremist groups and includes recommendations for programming based on those particular insights. In the report, four broad pillars are identified as underpinning a child resilience strategy: building potentiality and competency; developing social interest; strengthening the social contract; and eliminating violence against children. The Special Representative produced a second report in 2020, entitled "Solutions for children previously affiliated with extremist groups: an evidence base to inform repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration", which provides a look at sustainable reintegration based on the experiences of children formerly associated with armed forces or groups or criminal gangs.

42. Building on the report of the Secretary-General on protecting children from bullying (A/71/213 and A/73/265), the Special Representative is exploring links between bullying and hate speech among children. Bullying and hate speech have similarities in that schoolyard bullies often victimize children with differences that society has already viewed in a controversial or even pejorative manner. This underscores the importance of including issues of tolerance and respect for diversity in anti-bullying programmes in school as a preventive measure also against hate speech.

43. Online safety is of increasing concern for the Special Representative as more and more children make use of online opportunities for learning, support and play, which at the same time also increases their exposure to the risk of online violence, including peer-to-peer violence, cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, trafficking, hate speech and recruitment by violent extremist groups. The Special Representative participated in several events at which she emphasized the need for paying greater

⁸ Available at <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/leaders-statement-violence-against-children-hidden-crisis-covid-19-pandemic>.

attention to the protection of children online and advocated the development by all Member States of a safe, inclusive and empowering digital agenda for children. She spoke at the sixth World Internet Conference, the Child Dignity in the Digital World Congress hosted by Pope Francis and the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities, the WeProtect Global Alliance Summit and the ASEAN Regional Conference on Child Online Protection. On those occasions, the Special Representative emphasized the empowerment of children to act as agents of change in advancing child protection online and the need for stronger action, coordination and accountability for key actors in that field.

44. The Special Representative also participated in the working group established by ITU to update the global Guidelines for Child Online Protection.⁹ In order to better respond to children's protection needs within the online environment, the Special Representative has partnered with ITU to promote safer child participation within the online sphere, including by influencing the private sector, and advocating for new engagement platforms.

45. Justice for children is also a high priority for the Special Representative. During the 2019 high-level political forum, the Special Representative, together with several other United Nations entities and civil society organizations, launched a call to action on justice for children.¹⁰ Under the umbrella of Sustainable Development Goal 16+, the call for action served to identify three areas of work that need to be addressed to guarantee access to justice for children: promotion of justice as an enabler of children's development, focusing on the preventive role that justice can play by ensuring that children's rights are protected; accelerated action to respond to the urgent and critical challenges; and establishment and sustaining of the foundations for change.

46. The Special Representative is co-organizing the World Congress on Justice for Children, which will be held in Mexico in November 2021, Under the theme "Access to justice for all children: towards non-discriminatory and inclusive child justice systems". The Special Representative will use the call for action and the World Congress as opportunities to advocate for justice for children in the broadest sense.

F. Increased cooperation with civil society organizations and faith-based organizations

47. In addition to engaging with global partnerships and alliances on ending violence against children, the Special Representative also sought to amplify the advocacy of international civil society organizations, including faith-based organizations, through participation in their global events and initiatives. In that regard she also sought to strengthen cooperation by instituting quarterly meetings to provide opportunities to exchange information on global initiatives of civil society organizations, as well as to address advocacy work at the international level and explore opportunities for collaboration. Participants at the quarterly meetings include representatives of regional civil society organization networks in Africa, Asia and Latin America who bring important regional perspectives to the discussion, as well as specialists from such organizations who provide insights into their work with Member States in intergovernmental processes.

48. The Special Representative developed a set of strategic priorities for the work of the mandate in consultation with key stakeholders, including civil society, faith-

⁹ Available at www.itu-cop-guidelines.com/.

¹⁰ Available at https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/justice_for_children_-_call_to_action.pdf.

based organizations, and child and youth organizations. As a follow-up, regular quarterly group meetings have been held with representatives of those organizations, many of which are part of the Civil Society Forum to End Violence against Children.

49. The Special Representative continued to participate regularly in civil society organization-led initiatives and events related to the protection of children from violence. The Special Representative is a part of and provides technical support to various initiatives focused on ending violence against children that are led by civil society organizations, including faith-based organizations and faith-inspired organizations.

50. The Special Representative is a frequent speaker at events and webinars organized by civil society organizations and faith-based and faith-inspired organizations, including those that were organized in response to concern about increased violence against children due to COVID-19. The Office of the Special Representative also provides technical expertise and guidance to civil society organization-led publications, most recently to the drafting process for an implementation guide on advancing the rights of children human rights defenders.

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

51. The Special Representative led the United Nations inter-agency task force that supported the development of the global study on children deprived of liberty, which was submitted to the General Assembly in October 2019 ([A/74/136](#)).

52. According to the full version of the global study,¹¹ 7 million children were deprived of their liberty worldwide, including 410,000 children held in jails or prisons, 330,000 in immigration detention centres and between 430,000 and 680,000 in institutions that met the legal definition of deprivation of liberty. The global study highlighted the negative impact that deprivation of liberty could have on children, including severe developmental delays, disability, irreversible psychological damage and increased rates of suicide and recidivism.

53. Under the continued leadership of the Special Representative, and in accordance with General Assembly resolution [74/133](#) and the recommendation made by the Independent Expert in paragraph 148 of his report ([A/74/136](#)), the task force was recently reconstituted with new terms of reference that focus on the follow-up to the recommendations set out in the global study on children deprived of liberty. The members include a wide range of United Nations entities and mechanisms: Committee on the Rights of the Child, IOM, OHCHR, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNODC and WHO.

54. The task force has conducted a mapping of the global study's recommendations to assist with tracking activities and results at the global, regional and national levels. Its work is underpinned by a commitment to coordinated action that promotes synergies, avoids duplication of effort and promotes closer cooperation with States, the related NGO panel, the lead author and Independent Expert leading the global study on children deprived of liberty, academia and other relevant key stakeholders.

55. In July, the Special Representative moderated a webinar that addressed the impact of COVID-19 on children deprived of liberty,¹² which was organized by the NGO Panel for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty in close cooperation with the members of the task force and with the support of the Governments of Austria

¹¹ Available at <https://omnibook.com/view/e0623280-5656-42f8-9edf-5872f8f08562/page/1>.

¹² See <https://defenceforchildren.org/16th-july-covid-19s-impact-on-children-deprived-of-liberty/>.

and Uruguay. During the webinar, the Special Representative presented, on behalf of the task force, the modalities for ensuring a coordinated and close follow-up of the recommendations of the global study.

III. Impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on violence against children

A. Far-reaching, long-term negative impact on children worldwide

56. The COVID-19 pandemic is harming children worldwide, with the greatest impact on the poorest and most vulnerable children. While the data available so far is only indicative, the mitigation measures taken in response to COVID-19 have heightened the risk of children experiencing or being exposed to violence at home on account of school closures, confinement, movement restrictions, disruption of the provision of already limited child protection services, or added family stress related to job loss, isolation and anxieties over health and finances.

57. Child abuse is less likely to be detected during the COVID-19 crisis, as child protection agencies have had to reduce monitoring to avoid spreading the virus, and teachers are less able to detect signs of ill treatment with schools being closed. There has been a decrease in the number of calls to hotlines for reporting abuse and exploitation, most probably owing to a lack of access by the victims during lockdowns, as well as by teachers, social workers and other childcare providers. These circumstances raise concerns that the most vulnerable children are not able to access the support that they need.

58. Widespread use of online platforms can mitigate the education loss caused by school closures, but the poorest children are least likely to live in a suitable home-learning environment with an adequate Internet connection. Furthermore, increased unsupervised online Internet use has exacerbated sexual exploitation and cyberbullying. Europol has highlighted that its law enforcement partners are reporting increased online activity by those seeking child abuse material owing to increased time spent and opportunities presented online because of COVID-19.

59. COVID-19 has increased the vulnerability of children already at risk as more and more families fall into extreme poverty. In addition, movement restrictions, loss of income, isolation, overcrowding and high levels of stress and anxiety have added a new group of children who are at increased risk of experiencing and observing physical, psychological and sexual abuse at home.

60. The economic crisis caused by COVID-19 will increase child poverty and vulnerability to violence. The World Bank has estimated that up to 100 million more people may be forced into extreme poverty.¹³ ILO reports that a one percentage point rise in poverty leads to at least a 0.7 per cent increase in child labour in certain countries, which will reverse the progress on decreasing child labour for the first time in 20 years.¹⁴ Poverty is a driver of child trafficking, sexual exploitation and the recruitment of children into criminal gangs and armed groups and forces. Poverty also increases the risk of child marriage: the United Nations Population Fund projects that an additional 13 million child marriages may take place over the next 10 years.¹⁵ In

¹³ See World Bank, “Projected poverty impacts of COVID-19 (coronavirus)”, 8 June 2020.

¹⁴ See International Labour Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund, “COVID-19 and child labour. a time of crisis, a time to act”, 2020.

¹⁵ See United Nations Population Fund, “Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family planning and ending gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage”, 27 April 2020. Available at www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital.

short, the crisis is having life-altering consequences for millions of children and young people worldwide.

61. The COVID-19 pandemic harms children's mental health. In addition to the impact of the violence experienced by children during the pandemic, the stress and uncertainty associated with the outbreak potentially has significant negative effects on children's mental well-being. In various consultations of children undertaken by civil society organizations, children expressed that they felt unsafe, insecure, scared, lonely and isolated. It is known that toxic stress and anxiety have negative and long-lasting effects on children's mental health, including sleep and eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

62. At the same time, COVID-19 also presents serious challenges to the delivery of mental health services, including for children who were already having mental health difficulties before the pandemic.

B. Mitigation measures and promising practices

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

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

65. A number of States have also introduced or strengthened the capacity of helplines and gender-based violence services to respond to survivors or witnesses of violence who may be caught in situations of lockdown with their abusers. 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.

66. 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.

67. Efforts have also been made to inform children in a child-friendly, age-appropriate manner on the effects and responses to COVID-19. Some States have developed innovative ways to listen to and learn from children about their experience of the current response 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 – whether through volunteering their help within communities, or combating stigma, xenophobia and discrimination online.

68. In countries that included school closures as part of their response, many 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 that come to their attention, including cyberbullying.

69. In tandem with this, there have been important actions 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 to children – especially in places under lockdown in order to provide education, work, and public information on COVID-19 – is a substantial part of the response to maintain children’s learning, support and play.

70. Lockdowns and loss or reduction of employment has reduced the incomes of households with children, resulting in an increased risk of forms of violence. During the pandemic, many countries have introduced new or scaled-up social protection services. As of July 2020, ILO reported that at least 60 countries had strengthened social protection for children and families as a response to COVID-19, including by setting up new child grant programmes, increasing the value of existing child grants, and extending the coverage of targeted cash transfer programmes.¹⁶ These interventions have mitigated the risk of children falling into poverty and given impetus to calls to establish permanent systems of social protection, including through universal child grant systems, that can support children and their families in good times and bad. Measures have also been taken to support children’s food security and nutrition.

71. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opening to re-engage in child justice reforms and bring about sustainable long-term change. According to data from UNICEF, at least 31 countries have released children from detention in connection with concerns about the spread of COVID-19. It begs the question: if it is safe to release children from detention now, why were they detained in the first place? The Special Representative intends to use this opening to advocate that deprivation of liberty be truly a measure of last resort for all children, and that alternatives to detention be used, such as diversion and restorative justice.

C. Mobilization action, sharing knowledge

72. The Special Representative swiftly mobilized the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children, which issued a joint agenda for action on child protection and COVID-19 in support of the policy brief of the Secretary-General on the impact of COVID-19 on children. The agenda for action provides guidance for Member States on how to include child protection in the COVID-19 response in both the short and long term and is available in Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish. It includes information drawn from the expertise and mandates of the agencies in the Working Group and therefore offers a road map for a holistic response.

73. The Special Representative also joined a number of other related inter-agency efforts. She provided input to 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. She was also a frequent speaker at related webinars organized by the Alliance, the Global Partnership to end Violence against Children and numerous civil society organizations.

74. Even during this challenging time, children’s resilience, activism and sense of solidarity are remarkable. With the use of digital technology, children around the world are providing peer-to-peer support to help ease the stress they experience, taking their activism online to share safety information among their peers, volunteering to provide essential services to other children in need, organizing themselves around positive messaging, documenting their lives under COVID-19 to find commonalities regardless of geographical boundaries, and sharing online their experiences with one another. Children are also identifying offline means to participate, even during measures of

¹⁶ See www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowWiki.action?id=3417.

confinement and social distancing. A common ingredient throughout children's engagement has been the importance of peer-to-peer support.

75. The COVID-19 pandemic is unique in its global reach and scale of its impact; however, experts have warned that more such pandemics can be expected in the future. The present time is therefore a key moment to ensure that lessons are learned from the violence-related aspects of the first lockdown so that they can be integrated into emergency preparedness, including the development of protocols for service delivery and the protection of children's rights. The Special Representative has started to collect experiences from different countries as a contribution to that effort.

IV. Children leading the way: informing, listening, and empowering children

76. 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. Child participation takes place in a rapidly changing world where the almost universal access to information and communications technology enables children to communicate with each other beyond any geographical or cultural barrier and provides real-time access to what is going on in the world.

77. The environmental and social unrest experienced in many countries before COVID-19 are examples of how children and young people are organizing and demanding change. To help ensure that children's voices are amplified and their views taken fully into account, the Special Representative has pursued close collaboration with child-led and child-focused organizations.

78. In recognition of children's active engagement, the Special Representative supports work on empowering and safeguarding children as human rights defenders. Children as human rights defenders was the topic of the 2018 Day of General Discussion of the Committee on the Rights of the Child,¹⁷ and the Special Representative has provided technical input to Child Rights Connect in the development of a toolkit containing guidance for States and other stakeholders on how to ensure that national laws, policies and practices allow children to fully and safely exercise their rights when acting as human rights defenders.

79. The Special Representative participated in virtual Scouts jamborees in 2020, as she had done in 2019. The jamborees brought together over 1.5 million young participants from all regions. The engagement consisted of fruitful discussions led by young Scouts on topics related to the protection of children from violence. The Special Representative further enhanced collaboration with the global leadership of the Scouts by contributing to the development of the "Safe from harm" programme, which includes modules on cybersecurity, preventing abuse and discrimination, respecting differences and promoting mental health.

80. The Special Representative issued a report entitled *When Children Take the Lead: 10 Child Participation Approaches to Tackle Violence*, in which she examined the experience of child participation related to different forms of violence, spanning initiatives driven by Governments, international organizations and civil society. The focus of the report is on children's roles, the methods used, the balance between offline and online, and how each initiative has achieved its impact. The report also serves to identify common elements that make child participation effective for

¹⁷ See United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, Day of General Discussion 2018, outcome report, "Protecting and empowering children as human rights defenders".

violence prevention, reporting and awareness, offering concrete recommendations for children's rights-based organizations. The importance of the peer-to-peer component, in which children successfully influence change and help to prevent violence, is one of the key recommendations contained in the report, an aspect that has been confirmed in the initiatives that children are advancing in the time of COVID-19.

81. In collaboration with partners, the Special Representative holds regular meetings during her country visits and regional activities, and in New York and Geneva with children and student activists who are working in their own community to promote children's rights and protection from all forms of violence. For example, in July 2020, the Special Representative hosted a group discussion with children and young activists who participated in the high-level political forum to present their work, which included the development of the shadow reports of the national voluntary reviews of their Governments.

82. Since child participation is rapidly evolving, the Special Representative has been mapping and documenting how children are exercising their right to participate, in order to make recommendations that meet children's needs today. Children are being innovative, leading the way, holding duty bearers and decision makers locally and globally accountable, when adults fulfil their responsibility to guide children and provide them with the necessary skills and tools, like advocacy training.

83. The Special Representative is also part of the #CovidUnder19 initiative, a collaborative process initiated by civil society organizations with technical support from academia. The initiative brings together children, experts and other key stakeholders, to work on understanding what children are experiencing during the pandemic. The aim of the initiative is to create spaces for children across the globe to be meaningfully involved in the discussions around the issues that the pandemic has triggered and contribute towards shaping a post-COVID-19 world.

84. As an initial activity under the #CovidUnder19 initiative, a questionnaire in 27 languages was developed with children from different countries and disseminated throughout the world to collect children's experiences and views regarding their lives and their surroundings under the pandemic. To date, over 21,000 children from all geographical regions have responded to the questionnaire. The preliminary results show that over half of children report that they have experienced, heard of or witnessed the same degree of violence or more violence, both in the real world and online, since the pandemic started. Some groups have experienced higher levels of violence, including children from minorities, children from migrant communities, children with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children.

85. Almost half of children who reported feeling less safe where they live also said that they have less knowledge now than before the lockdown on how to get help and support. Nine out of 10 children said that their friends had been able to help them during confinement but connecting with them had been challenging. Finally, in a post-COVID-19 world, over 90 per cent of children wanted to help their families and two thirds wanted to get involved in their communities or get involved with other children and young people in schools, youth groups or through other channels.

86. Initial snapshots of how children are globally experiencing COVID-19 confirm the need for more disaggregated data that differentiate children's exposure to violence at home and outside the home, in person or online, as well as violence inflicted by adults or their peers. Final results from the #CovidUnder19 initiative will be widely disseminated and shared with all key stakeholders, including children at the global, regional and national levels.

87. Children's active involvement before and during COVID-19, whether online or offline, is proving that children can and are being part of the solution. Their inputs, experience, knowledge and resilience are critical for building the post-COVID world.

88. The Special Representative encourages all stakeholders to strengthen the positive role of child participation by developing a constructive dialogue with children and considering them as key actors in building back better and accelerating action towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

V. Building back better after COVID-19 while accelerating action and embarking on new pathways to realize the 2030 Agenda

89. The present report was written in a context in which every country in the world has been negatively affected by the pandemic. During the period of the pandemic, the provision of already limited child protection services has been interrupted, and the recovery phase will put immense pressure on the systems that provide care for children, both from the perspective of children's abuse and their safety, and with respect to the intensity and impact of child poverty. The increased reliance on technology during the pandemic also risks further deepening the digital divide, leaving disadvantaged children even further behind. In the words of the Secretary-General: "What began as a health crisis risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis."

90. The far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 crisis call for children and their rights to health, education, participation and protection to be prioritized in the pandemic response and recovery planning. The recovery is an opportunity for Governments worldwide to reassess priorities – advancing human development and reducing inequalities, especially for children, calls for a major investment. The cost to the child and to broader society of not strengthening social and child protection systems in the recovery phase is simply too high. This must also involve children as part of the solution in the immediate and recovery phase of this pandemic.

91. Globally, effective government responses to the increased risk of violence against children must ensure that social and child protection services are recognized as life-saving and essential services, along with health, mental health and education, as part of an intersectoral and child rights-based response. Those services must be built on a solid foundation of a permanent social protection system that shields children and their caregivers from economic risks.

92. Even the most economically advanced countries are struggling to cope with the health, social and economic fallout of the pandemic, but the poorest and most disadvantaged countries will inevitably be hit the hardest. Without support from the international community, the crisis could destabilize the economies of already impoverished nations, with devastating effects on children. The year 2020 marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, and its message of solidarity, multi-stakeholder cooperation and multilateralism must be heeded now more than ever.

93. The Special Representative intends to make the inclusion of children in the post-COVID-19 recovery a priority over the next year. The envisaged activities include the collection of experiences from violence-related aspects in the response to COVID-19 and the development of lessons learned and guidance for emergency preparedness. She is also promoting an initiative to establish a high-level champions group that will advocate for the inclusion of child rights and child protection in the recovery phase from the pandemic and in the longer term. Child participation will

continue to be a focus, as will the acceleration of action towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.

94. The international community is at a crucial turning point in the lives of a generation of children who will be most affected by COVID-19. All stakeholders must do everything possible to ensure that children do not become the main victims of the pandemic, and to build a better world where children's rights are promoted and protected, and where no child is left behind.
