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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 [64/146](#). In the report, the Special Representative describes trends, issues of concern and progress made on ending violence against children, including the mainstreaming of child protection issues within the United Nations system. She focuses on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on children, which has been more severe than predicted. She reports on progress towards realizing the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to build a just, inclusive and peaceful environment that keeps all children safe from all forms of violence, while building back better after the pandemic. The report also provides information on the engagement of the Special Representative with States and other key stakeholders, including children. It concludes with recommendations that emphasize the critical need for greater investment in integrated services for children, including sustainable and inclusive social protection for children and their caregivers, and the need to involve children and young people as part of the solution to the violence that affects them.

* [A/76/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. Guided by General Assembly resolution [62/141](#), by which the Assembly established the mandate, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children is a global, independent advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children. In its resolution [73/155](#), the Assembly reaffirmed its support for the work of the Special Representative, recognizing the progress achieved and the role of the mandate in promoting further implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children, as well as in supporting Member States in the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

2. The year covered in the present report was a year like no other, marked by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and its unprecedented global impact. In her previous report to the General Assembly ([A/75/149](#)), the Special Representative stressed that the pandemic was exposing children to an ever greater risk of violence by exacerbating the inequalities that already threatened their physical, emotional and mental well-being long before the current crisis.

3. One year on, the damage caused by the pandemic was – and continues to be – even worse than anticipated. The impact on children is unlikely to end as the pandemic recedes: past experience suggests that the surges in interpersonal violence that are commonplace during the acute phase of a crisis are often sustained for years, even when the crisis itself has ebbed away.¹

4. The present report covers the immediate and long-term impact of the pandemic on violence against children, as well as the progress made and the challenges that remain in guaranteeing the protection of children and ensuring that no child is left behind. It sets out the action taken and the results achieved by the Special Representative over the past year to respond to the pandemic and to support implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It also highlights the action taken by children themselves to prevent and respond to violence and to support each other's well-being, highlighting the need to safeguard the empowerment of children in preventing and responding to the violence that they face.

5. With less than eight years until the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – and with the impact of the pandemic posing such a severe threat to progress – there is an urgent need to invest in an inclusive, resilient and safe recovery that works for and with children. In the context of the implementation of the Goals and building back better in the post-pandemic recovery, the Special Representative has emphasized the need to invest in integrated services for children – including child protection, mental health, physical health, education and justice – while ensuring that robust and inclusive social protection systems are in place to support children and their families.

II. Impact of the pandemic on children: more severe than predicted

6. It was clear from the earliest days of the pandemic that it would have a far-reaching, long-term and profoundly damaging impact on children. In her previous report, the Special Representative noted that school closures, confinement, movement restrictions and additional family stress had heightened the risks of children being exposed to violence.

¹ Yasmin B. Kofman and Dana R. Garfin, “Home is not always a haven: the domestic violence crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic”, *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, vol. 12, No. S1 (August 2020).

7. The impact on children has included the loss of parents and other caregivers. In a study published in *The Lancet*, it was estimated that 1,134,000 children globally lost a primary caregiver (at least one parent or custodial grandparent) to COVID-19 between 1 March 2020 and 30 April 2021.² Orphanhood and the death of caregivers are now hidden pandemics resulting from COVID-19, and both put children at risk of violence.

8. Lockdowns and isolation, combined with increased psychological and economic stress, have created a wave of family violence. Initial reports contain indications of a rise in the proportion of traumatic injuries caused by physical child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic³ and an increase in gender-based violence: 243 million women and girls aged 15–49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner.⁴

9. While the widespread use of online platforms has helped to prevent the loss of education during the pandemic, it has also brought an increased risk of exposing children to online harm. The International Criminal Police Organization has highlighted increased activity by offenders who create and share child sexual abuse material online, more livestreaming of child sexual abuse and a rise in sexual material that is generated by children themselves.⁵

10. The pandemic has expanded both the supply of and demand for trafficking in children and is affecting low-income countries disproportionately. More children are at risk as the number out of school increases and they are drawn into child labour; and there is more demand for child sexual exploitation and for child recruits to armed and criminal groups, with growing clandestine and lucrative criminal activity often underpinned by evolving technologies and a culture of impunity. Children account for about one third of the detected victims of trafficking.⁶

11. Evidence also points towards an increase in cyberbullying, even among the millions of children who have not physically been going to school. In 2020, a U-Report poll of 5,000 children aged 13–18 commissioned by the Office of the Special Representative and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) showed that 43 per cent had seen a rise in negative experiences online, with the greatest increases reported in relation to cyberbullying.⁷

12. At the same time that children have faced increased violence, the pandemic has disrupted the established referral pathways and services aimed at supporting and protecting them. Schools are particularly important in this regard, and thus the disruption of children’s education has undermined a crucial protective factor. At the peak of national school closures in April 2020, over 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries were affected. As of June 2021, less than one third of low- and

² Susan Hillis and others, “Global minimum estimates of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and deaths of caregivers: a modelling study”, *The Lancet*, vol. 398, No. 10298 (July 2021).

³ Barbara Fallon and others, “Trends in investigations of abuse or neglect referred by hospital personnel in Ontario”, *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, vol. 3, No. 1 (February 2019); and Claudia Cappa and Isabel Jijon, “COVID-19 and violence against children: a review of early studies”, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 116, No. 2 (June 2021).

⁴ United Nations Population Fund, *State of the World’s Population 2021: My Body is My Own – Claiming the Right to Autonomy and Self-Determination* (New York, 2021).

⁵ International Criminal Police Organization, “Threats and trends in child sexual exploitation and abuse: COVID-19 impact” (September 2020).

⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020* (New York, 2020).

⁷ The 5,000 responses combine five sets of poll results, with a consistent set of questions shared through multiple U-Report channels. The sets of results, which were combined into a single analysis, are available at the following links: <https://ureport.in/opinion/4311> (U-Report Global); <https://argentina.ureport.in/opinion/1776> (U-Report Argentina); <http://nigeria.ureport.in/opinion/4336> (U-Report Nigeria); <https://kiribati.ureport.in/opinion/4375/> (U-Report Kiribati); and <https://ghana.ureport.in/opinion/4369> (U-Report Ghana).

middle-income countries reported that all students had returned to school in person, with a heightened risk of learning loss and dropout.⁸

13. The pandemic has magnified the digital divide between the global North and the global South, and between urban and the rural communities – a divide that was already affecting poor and marginalized children disproportionately.

14. The pandemic has also disrupted the delivery of justice systems, increasing the backlog of cases resulting in increasingly lengthy judicial and administrative proceedings. The impact has been felt most acutely by children at risk and victims of violence, undocumented migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and children in detention, including pretrial detainees. In addition, a lack of functioning judicial oversight reduces monitoring and the prevention of ill-treatment in detention facilities.

15. Evidence of the impact of the pandemic on children's mental health signals their greater anxiety and the further deterioration of any pre-existing mental health conditions that they may have had.⁹ In a survey published in October 2020, the World Health Organization found that mental health services for children and adolescents were among the services disrupted most severely during the pandemic, with disruptions identified in more than 70 per cent of countries.¹⁰

16. Children themselves have highlighted violence as a major concern. According to its report entitled "Voices during the COVID-19 pandemic: the impact on children, young people and helplines around the world", Child Helpline International found that its member organizations had received 25 per cent more contact from children in 2020 than in 2019, with violence and mental health the main reasons for calling. Member organizations had to extend online support times and recruit more volunteers to cope with a surge in demand.¹¹

17. While it is still too soon to see the full picture, most initial studies point to a significant increase in inequality and poverty as a result of the pandemic. Poverty and social exclusion are powerful drivers of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. It is estimated that an additional 142 million children fell into poverty in 2020 as families lost jobs and income.¹² According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF, the number of children in child labour rose to 160 million worldwide in 2020 – an increase of 8.4 million children over the past four years, with millions more at risk owing to the impacts of the pandemic.¹³ An additional 10 million girls are thought to be at risk of child marriage over the next decade.¹⁴

18. The effects of the pandemic have not been felt evenly across all groups. It has exacerbated existing inequalities, exposing children who were already more marginalized and vulnerable to violence before the pandemic to ever greater risks, including girls, children with disabilities, indigenous children, refugee, displaced and migrant children, children living or working on the streets, children in alternative care and children in detention.

⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Bank, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *What's Next? Lessons on Education Recovery: Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Paris, New York and Washington, D.C., 2021).

⁹ OECD, "Combating COVID-19's effect on children" (Paris, 2020).

¹⁰ World Health Organization, "The impact of COVID-19 on mental, neurological and substance use services: results of a rapid assessment" (Geneva, 2020).

¹¹ Child Helpline International, "Voices during the Covid-19 pandemic: the impact on children, young people and helplines around the world" (Amsterdam, 2021).

¹² See UNICEF, "Child poverty and COVID-19" (November 2020).

¹³ International Labour Office and UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward* (New York, 2021).

¹⁴ UNICEF, "COVID-19: a threat to progress against child marriage" (New York, 2021).

A. Responses: progress and promising practices

19. Despite the many challenges posed by the pandemic, there have been examples of promising practices to tackle violence against children. The Special Representative joined forces with the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures and 16 other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to find out how the provision of services to children has been ensured. Respondents from 22 countries provided information using an online application and reported good collaboration across organizations, enhanced staff coordination, a sharper focus on support for parents and greater consultation with children. The use of virtual platforms to communicate with children and families and deliver services has been particularly important, although the digital divide in children's access to the Internet remains a concern.¹⁵

20. Many countries have worked to ensure that child helplines have remained operational, as well as mechanisms to screen and prioritize calls where children are at high risk. In addition, national networks of psychologists, social workers and probation officers providing services to children and families have been reinforced.

21. To mitigate the risk that containment measures could lead to increased violence in the home, Governments have been developing innovative ways to deliver positive parenting messages and support using online platforms, text messaging and telephone calls. Parenting resources developed through the Parenting for Lifelong Health initiative, for example, have reached more than 80 million people through a variety of media and are being adopted by 29 Governments.¹⁶

22. ILO reported that at least 72 countries strengthened social protection for children and families as a response to the pandemic, including by setting up new child grant programmes, increasing the value of existing child grants and extending the coverage of targeted cash transfer programmes.¹⁷ According to data from the World Bank, at least \$800 billion has been invested in social protection over the past nine months. This has funded more than 1,400 social protection measures of which around one third have taken the form of cash transfers, reaching over 1.1 billion people, or 14 per cent of the world's population.¹⁸ Relative to pre-pandemic levels, cash transfer benefits have nearly doubled, and coverage has grown by 240 per cent.¹⁹

23. States also explored innovative ways to ensure the continuity of justice and legal services, including safeguarding access to justice for child victims and witnesses of crimes through the use of technology to facilitate the videoconferencing of court hearings.²⁰ In addition, UNICEF reported that at least 37 countries released more than 11,600 children as a preventive response to the pandemic, using alternative measures to detention and placing moratoriums on any new admissions of children into detention. This highlights the fact that, when there is the political will, the detention of children can be minimized.

24. Globally, 149 countries have integrated prevention of and response to violence against women and girls into their pandemic response plans, and 136 countries have adopted measures to strengthen services for survivors of gender-based violence. This

¹⁵ See <https://inspiringchildrensfutures.org/blog/learning-report-challenges>.

¹⁶ Henrietta Fore, "Violence against children in the time of COVID-19: what we have learned, what remains unknown and the opportunities that lie ahead", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 116, No. 2 (June 2020).

¹⁷ See www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowMainPage.action.

¹⁸ World Bank, *Investing in Human Capital for a Resilient Recovery: The Role of Public Finance* (Washington, D.C., 2021).

¹⁹ UNICEF, "Financing an inclusive recovery for children: a call to action" (New York, 2021).

²⁰ UNICEF, "Access to justice for children in the era of Covid-19: learnings from the field" (New York, 2020).

builds on existing national policy frameworks to address violence against children, such as those highlighted by the World Health Organization in its *Global Status Report on Preventing Violence against Children 2020*.

25. The pandemic response presents an opportunity for States to renew their commitments to ending violence against children as part of global efforts to build back better.

26. The Special Representative promotes an integrated approach to tackling violence against children, and national socioeconomic recovery plans developed in response to the pandemic have incorporated elements of this approach. In many cases, plans support or complement other policy frameworks to advance sustainable development. However, the scope and resources for the elements related to ending violence and its drivers is uneven. While some have underpinned an integrated approach with dedicated funding, others have not.

27. Children and young people have played a critical role in response to the pandemic, providing vital support to their communities, families and peers. When services were curtailed, children often stepped in to support those who were hardest to reach, including children living or working on the streets and those in remote areas.

B. Building back better: investing in an inclusive, resilient and safe recovery for children

28. The wide-ranging social and economic costs of the pandemic are likely to have long-term repercussions for children's development and well-being around the world, in particular for marginalized and vulnerable groups. These losses will affect not only the prospects for children themselves, but also the future for their families, communities and societies for decades to come.

29. While the pandemic has imposed severe fiscal constraints on Governments, a paradigm shift is needed to treat spending on children's well-being as a key investment for an inclusive and sustainable recovery from the pandemic. This should be reflected in national development and economic recovery plans to maximize their coverage and impact for every child, leaving no one behind.

30. Integrated approaches to the post-pandemic response need to reflect and operationalize the existing interlinkages between the Sustainable Development Goals. It is not possible to end violence against children or build back better if the Goals related to poverty, hunger, health, education, justice, gender, social inclusion, decent work, equality, migration, climate change and peaceful societies are not all met for all children and families. Equally, progress towards the Goals will be impeded without an end to violence against children.

31. Building back better is an opportunity for a new social contract: one that is not only adult-centred but also child-centred and paves the way for more sustainable resilient economies and human capital development.

III. Accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

32. Violence undermines every aspect of national development, and bringing it to an end is essential for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Special Representative uses her global mandate to encourage Member States to share promising practices, innovations and lessons learned in the prevention of and response to violence against children.

A. Support to Member States

33. A key element of the Special Representative's outreach is close engagement with Member States in preparing voluntary national reviews for the high-level political forum on sustainable development. The Office of the Special Representative has developed guidance for Member States on how to use their voluntary national review processes to identify and report on promising practices and initiatives to prevent and respond to violence against children.²¹ The Office examines the reviews and presentations after each session of the forum to draw out and share the main themes, messages and lessons learned on progress towards the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals related to violence against children and its drivers, with a particular focus on children's involvement in the processes.

34. In 2021, the Special Representative met with 38 Member States that were presenting voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum, at an early stage of their process, encouraging them to use the forum to raise awareness of how violence hinders progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the steps needed for effective prevention. She also stressed that children themselves are key actors in national development and suggested ways to support their active engagement in the voluntary national review process.

35. The Special Representative also mobilized the United Nations system at the country level to help to ensure the availability of relevant technical support. In her discussions with resident coordinators and country teams, she stressed the shared responsibility of the United Nations development system in supporting Governments to reach the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals on children, including their protection from violence, and the need for a comprehensive, coherent and integrated approach.

36. In the lead-up to the high-level political forum, the Office of the Special Representative collaborated with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to organize an expert group meeting on Sustainable Development Goal 16 to assess progress and challenges, including the impact of the pandemic. The Special Representative also participated in the integration dialogues organized by the Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council in preparation for the integration segment of the forum.

37. The theme of the 2021 high-level political forum – sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic – was an opportunity to highlight lessons learned from the pandemic on how to strengthen the protection of children from violence. The Special Representative was a lead discussant at the high-level panel discussion on the theme “How do we get on track for building more peaceful, equal and inclusive societies”. The panel explored the importance of linkages across Sustainable Development Goals 3, 10, 16 and 17 and the other Goals, which is a key lesson learned from the pandemic.

38. The Office of the Special Representative and UNICEF co-organized a voluntary national review laboratory at the high-level political forum for representatives of Governments, the United Nations, children, young people and international financial institutions to explore promising practices and approaches to ensuring that voluntary national reviews are child-sensitive and inclusive. A strong message was conveyed about the need to prioritize investment in integrated systems of social services for children on the basis of a solid foundation of inclusive social protection.

²¹ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, “Decade of action, voluntary national reviews 2030: how to highlight promising practices to end violence against children” (New York, 2020).

39. After examining the 2020 voluntary national reviews, it was noted that 26 Member States had mentioned the participation of children and young people in the preparation process. This spanned a range of activities from focus group discussions to large-scale online surveys. In her outreach to Member States preparing reviews, the Special Representative stressed the importance of involving children; some Member States reported that they would consider including children as a part of their official delegation to the high-level political forum, while others invited the Special Representative to take part in national dialogues with children on the 2030 Agenda.

40. In June 2021, the Special Representative met with Member States of the Group of Friends for Children and the Sustainable Development Goals to discuss interlinkages across the Goals and agreed that investing in the well-being of children was vital for post-pandemic recovery. The importance of the more systematic participation of children in the voluntary national review and high-level political forum processes was also noted.

41. The Special Representative has promoted a vision of justice for children as a pathway for the building of peaceful, just and inclusive societies that is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. Several Member States are in the process of reforming their child justice laws and are being encouraged by the Special Representative to seize that opportunity to increase the minimum age of criminal responsibility, prioritize diversion and alternatives to detention and establish age-appropriate, child-friendly and gender-sensitive procedures for child victims and witnesses. In the context of building back better, the Special Representative has also emphasized the need to include access to justice in national socioeconomic recovery plans.

42. In all her advocacy, the Special Representative has also stressed the need to incorporate mental health into integrated approaches: action is required across the whole 2030 Agenda to address the drivers of violence and poor mental health and to create safe, nurturing and protective environments. The urgent need to address the impact of violence on children's mental health was the theme of a high-level event co-organized by the Group of Friends of Mental Health and Well-being and the Office of the Special Representative at the high-level political forum.

43. As a co-organizer of the 2021 World Congress on Justice for Children, the Special Representative used the multi-stakeholder preparatory processes to stress the need for high-level leadership, commitment and multisectoral collaboration to address critical issues for children in contact with the justice system, including the release of children from detention and their safe reintegration into society. These processes were used to identify regional and national trends, emerging challenges and positive developments in child justice systems and to share knowledge, innovations and lessons learned among policymakers and practitioners.

44. The lessons learned and promising practices gathered will inform a guide on access to justice for the prevention of and response to violence against children being developed by the Office of the Special Representative and presented at the World Congress. The guide will be a practical tool to assist States in their efforts to reform policies, laws and practices on children's access to justice and on child safeguarding. It will highlight good practices across different regions and legal systems and list key resources for each thematic area.

45. The Special Representative has also pursued her support to Member States on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals through participation in high-level policy dialogues and virtual country visits.

46. At the invitation of the Government of the Philippines, the Special Representative undertook a virtual country visit in April 2021. The Philippines has a comprehensive legal framework in place for the protection of children, and its plan

of action to end violence against children for the period 2017–2022 sets out clear goals and responsibilities. Through dialogue with the leaders of all relevant sectoral ministries and other stakeholders, the Special Representative helped to assess progress and challenges in the implementation of the plan of action. The dialogue highlighted the need to increase budgetary allocations for integrated social services for children and to respond to the potential long-term impact of the pandemic.

47. The Special Representative was the keynote speaker at a high-level national policy dialogue in Nigeria on ending violence against children, which involved taking stock of the achievements made by Nigeria since 2017 and was an opportunity to reaffirm the country's commitment to accelerating progress to ensure that every child lives in a nourishing, enabling and safe environment, including through the implementation of the Child Rights Act of 2003, ensuring universal birth registration and investing in services that protect children affected by violence.

48. The Special Representative took part in national consultations in Egypt and Madagascar on ensuring the participation of children in voluntary national review processes. She also held a consultation with members of the children's parliament of Namibia on how children can contribute to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Following the consultation, three child parliamentarians were selected to join the official delegation of Namibia to the high-level political forum.

49. In March 2021, the Special Representative held a dialogue with the national coordinating authority of Cyprus on the national preparatory process for the 2021 voluntary national review, with children involved as key stakeholders. The participation of children in the preparations and broader decision-making processes has included a children's parliament and a youth advisory group within the Office of the Commissioner for Children's Rights.

B. Strengthening collaboration within the United Nations system

50. The Special Representative continues to promote and strengthen collaboration on ending violence against children within the United Nations system.

51. The Special Representative is mandated to chair the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children (see General Assembly resolution [62/141](#)). Membership of the group has recently been extended to include the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Population Fund and the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide.

52. The United Nations task force on the global study on children deprived of liberty aims to support the implementation of General Assembly resolutions [74/133](#) and [75/185](#) and the recommendations in the report on the global study ([A/74/136](#)). Under the leadership of the Special Representative, the task force has supported coordinated action across Member States, United Nations entities, the NGO Panel for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, academic institutions and other key stakeholders.

53. The Special Representative has also strengthened collaboration with the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, as well as other United Nations entities and country teams in the region. She contributed to the guidelines on ending harmful practices related to beliefs in witchcraft, which have been developed by the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism and the Pan-African Parliament.

54. Collaboration with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict has been particularly important and has generated several joint statements on key issues. The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children has also joined United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict and chairs its working group on a survivor-centred approach.

55. As noted, the Special Representative is particularly concerned about the increase in trafficking in children and, in June 2020, joined the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons to reinforce efforts to combat this crime through an integrated and coordinated approach.²²

56. The Office of the Special Representative has reactivated its collaboration with the children and youth major group and organized a networking session at the Economic and Social Council youth forum to raise awareness on ending violence against children in the context of the 2030 Agenda. In addition, the Special Representative has ongoing contact with the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth to ensure that the two Offices complement and strengthen each other's work on the participation of adolescents.

57. The Special Representative provided inputs to the study of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with a strong focus on the rights of children, highlighting concerns about the persistently high rates of family removal, the disproportionate incarceration of indigenous children, their mental health and their high rates of suicide.

58. The Special Representative used her participation in forums on social development organized in 2021 by the regional commissions to support Member States that were preparing voluntary national reviews, reinforcing her call for child-centred implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Office of the Special Representative also supported planning of the thematic meeting on Sustainable Development Goal 16 at the eighth session of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. The Special Representative strengthened collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa, with a particular focus on mainstreaming child rights into the implementation of the Goals across the continent. Collaboration with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia has also served as a key vehicle for her work on the implementation process of the Goals in the region. The Special Representative joined forces with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and UNICEF to issue a report on violence against children and adolescents during the pandemic.²³

59. The Special Representative strengthened her support to the United Nations system by liaising closely with country teams and resident coordinators to support voluntary national review processes, prepare high-level policy dialogues and virtual country visits and exchange information on promising practices and measures to address the challenges and sensitive issues that children face in different contexts.

IV. Strengthening partnerships and alliances

60. The collaboration of many different actors is critical in efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children, given that the complexity of issues affecting

²² UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

²³ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, "Violence against children and adolescents in the time of COVID-19" (Santiago, 2020).

their lives cannot be divided along the mandates and themes of the organizations working on their behalf. Children are often exposed to more than one form of violence and in more than one setting. To promote collaboration, therefore, the Special Representative has continued to use her mandate as a bridge-builder and catalyst for change to establish and strengthen partnerships and alliances.

A. Working with regional organizations

61. The Special Representative strengthened partnerships with regional intergovernmental mechanisms to promote an integrated and child-sensitive approach, collect information and disaggregated data, identify challenges and share promising practices.

62. In Africa, the Special Representative continued to strengthen collaboration with the African Union and developed a regional strategy for collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders. Through the strategy, the Special Representative aimed to forge a close partnership with regional mechanisms of the African Union, such as the African Union Commission, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and the Pan-African Parliament, in order to make progress on ending violence against children through advances in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want and Africa's Agenda for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children.

63. The Special Representative reinforced her engagement with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States with road maps for collaboration through 2022. The Office of the Special Representative joined the ECOWAS working group against gender-based violence and violence against children to help to ensure that children were considered within the ECOWAS frameworks and policies on ending gender-based violence. The Special Representative provided technical input to ECOWAS for the preparation of the guidance for its country visits, in line with her promotion of an integrated and programmatic approach to child protection.

64. The Special Representative continued to implement the road map established with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, including technical support to key documents such as the recently adopted general comments on the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (article 22, armed conflicts, and article 27, sexual exploitation). The Special Representative participated at the celebration, held in November 2020, of the thirtieth anniversary of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, issuing with a joint statement with the Committee on the pervasive and entrenched nature of violence against children in the region.²⁴

65. The Special Representative was a keynote speaker at the European Union Forum on the Rights of the Child held in September 2020. The Forum helped to shape the European Union strategy on the rights of the child issued in March 2021, which includes combating violence against children as one of its six thematic priorities.

66. The Special Representative continued her strong engagement with the Council of Europe and support for implementation of its Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016–2021), which includes ending violence against children as a priority. The Council promoted its implementation through the development of new standards and

²⁴ Available at <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/joint-statement-african-committee-experts-rights-and-welfare-child-and-united-nations-special>.

enhanced support to Member States for national-level implementation and by building platforms for cooperation and information-sharing. The Special Representative contributed to the work of the Council's Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child, which is tasked with overseeing the implementation of the current Strategy and developing the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027).

67. The Special Representative established a solid partnership with the Special Representative and Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The aim of the strategic partnership is to strengthen and mobilize the efforts of States, as well as promote the exchange of knowledge and experiences, in the context of what works to tackle child trafficking. The Special Representative was a keynote speaker at a side event of the twenty-first Conference of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons, organized by OSCE. The event, on the theme “Protecting the most vulnerable: putting a spotlight on the demand that fosters trafficking in children”, and the Conference provided opportunities to focus the attention of the 57 participating States on the demand side of trafficking – an area insufficiently addressed in global efforts to fight this crime.

68. The Special Representative continued to strengthen her collaboration with the League of Arab States and has agreed on a set of joint priority activities for 2021 and 2022. The Office of the Special Representative provided input for the Arab Regional Conference on the theme “Towards a regional action plan on belonging and legal identity”, held in May 2021. The Special Representative and the Regional Office for the Middle East and Northern Africa of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will develop guidance for the League of Arab States on ending the immigration detention of children in the region.

69. In July, the Special Representative, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the League of Arab States co-organized an event on protecting children in the Arab region that highlighted the continuum of violence against children in preconflict, conflict and post-conflict contexts, showing the impact of conflict on the rights of children and their well-being and on children in refugee settlements or undergoing reintegration programmes, as well as the efforts undertaken to better protect and strengthen the resilience of conflict-affected children.

70. The Special Representative continued to identify areas of collaboration and advocacy with regional organizations in Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Some planned activities and visits had to be postponed owing to the pandemic, but the Special Representative continued engagement with those two regions to ensure that support would be provided during the post-pandemic recovery phase.

B. Working with civil society and faith-based organizations

71. Containment measures to halt the spread of the pandemic resulted in a reduction of civic space for participation worldwide, as well as of essential services for child protection, many of which were being provided by civil society organizations and faith-based organizations. Against that backdrop, and in the context of the United Nations guidance note on the protection and promotion of civic space,²⁵ the Special Representative's outreach to Member States emphasized the need to mobilize a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society organizations and faith-based organizations, in efforts to implement and review the 2030 Agenda. The Special

²⁵ Available at https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf.

Representative participated in a series of workshops on the topic organized by civil society organizations and undertook outreach to relevant stakeholders.

72. The Special Representative continued her engagement with civil society organizations and faith-based organizations through quarterly meetings that provided opportunities to exchange information on global civil society initiatives and explore opportunities for collaboration on violence against children among civil society actors located in Geneva and New York.

73. To raise awareness about children's actions in this context, expand collaboration with civil society organizations and connect with children driving change in their communities, the Special Representative invited more than 140 national organizations to share their experiences of working with children as actors in the solutions to combatting violence against children.

74. The Special Representative strengthened her collaboration with the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and contributed to the drafting process of *Still Unprotected: Humanitarian Funding for Child Protection*, launched in October 2020, in which the authors noted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable children and emphasized the need to ensure that child protection was central to humanitarian responses.

75. Other important partnerships included those with membership organizations for children that have a strong global and country presence, for example, the Special Representative and the Secretary-General of the World Organization of the Scout Movement signed a letter of agreement on cooperation to strengthen the safety and protection of children from violence and increase community knowledge around the violence-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goal.

C. Working with the information and communications technology sector

76. Addressing the challenges to the protection of children online remains a priority for the Special Representative. Children have an ever-greater online presence, and it has increased even further owing to the pandemic. The age at which children first go online is also decreasing. The Office of the Special Representative has been working with the International Telecommunication Union to explore how children can use the online world to enhance their own protection, recognizing that it is an entry point for their safety and support. The Office and ITU have jointly connected with industry platforms and networks, co-organized events that focus on children as part of the solution to the protection of children online and explored safe participation platforms for children.

77. The Office also engaged directly with information and communications technology (ICT) companies to understand how children use online means to prevent, respond to and report violence (including accessing resources, helplines and services and creating peer-support systems) to identify safeguarding challenges related to their online engagement and to provide technical guidance.

V. Ending the immigration detention of children

78. The past few years have witnessed growing numbers of children on the move, including migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking children travelling alone or with their families across countries and borders. Children, particularly those who are travelling unaccompanied or without documents, or who have been separated from their families

or caregivers, are at high risk of various forms of violence, exploitation, abuse and trafficking.

79. Travel and movement restrictions related to the pandemic have not prevented children from undertaking perilous and at times deadly journeys. In addition, the mid- and long-term socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on children will push many more into a situation of extreme poverty and precarious living conditions that could shape their decision to migrate.

80. Migrant children are detained in more than 100 countries every day, whether travelling alone or with their families.²⁶ At the same time, the Special Representative acknowledges that progress has been made in phasing out the immigration detention of children, with many examples of successful rights-based alternative solutions in over 60 countries across all regions.

81. In 2021, the United Nations Task Force on the global study on children deprived of liberty has focused on ending the immigration detention of children and has seized opportunities presented by the assessment of progress towards Goals 10 and 16 at the meeting of the high-level political forum, as well as the ongoing processes of implementation, follow-up and review of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the global compact on refugees.

82. The Special Representative continued to strengthen collaboration on this issue with partners at the global, regional and national levels, including Member States; United Nations country teams; the United Nations Network on Migration and its working group on alternatives to detention; the Initiative for Child Rights in the Global Compacts; the NGO Panel for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; regional organizations and national human rights institutions, among others.

83. With inputs from the working group, the Special Representative emphasized the urgent need to end the immigration detention of children during her policy dialogues with the 38 countries that presented voluntary national reviews in 2021. Some of those countries have adopted concrete measures, such as legislation prohibiting the immigration detention of children; inclusive, child and gender-sensitive migration policies that allow access to documentation, education, health services, justice, child and social protection services, and residency. They have also strengthened transnational child protection mechanisms, promoted non-custodial and community-based alternatives and effected the release of migrant children who have been detained.

84. Coordinated, efficient and cost-effective action is particularly important in “building back better” after the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations Task Force will build upon the wealth of child rights-based alternative solutions existing in over 60 countries in all regions.²⁷ Many actions are already promoted by members of the United Nations Task Force, by Governments and by civil society organizations to end the immigration detention of children. The United Nations Task Force will advocate and act as a bridge-builder to capitalize on the experiences highlighted and widely documented by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants (see [A/75/183](#)), the working group of the United Nations Network on Migration²⁸,

²⁶ United Nations Network on Migration, “#ThereAreAlternatives to the immigration detention of children”. Available at <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/videos/therearealternatives-immigration-detention-children>.

²⁷ International Detention Coalition, *There are Alternatives: A Handbook for Preventing Unnecessary Immigration Detention (Revised Edition)* (Melbourne, 2015).

²⁸ United Nations Network on Migration, “Annex to policy brief: COVID-19 and immigration detention: what can Governments and other stakeholders do?” (February 2021). Available at https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/default/files/docs/annex_to_policy_brief_on_atd_and_covid-19.pdf.

UNICEF,²⁹ the International Detention Coalition,³⁰ the Initiative for Child Rights in the Global Compacts, as well as by the Special Representative.

VI. Children as part of the solution and actors of positive change

85. Promoting a culture of children's meaningful participation is a priority for the Special Representative. In March 2021, her Office issued a report entitled *Children as Agents of Positive Change: A Mapping of Children's Initiatives across Regions, towards an Inclusive and Healthy World Free from Violence*, in which participation initiatives of 246 organizations across 83 countries are highlighted. The initiatives have often been led by children and focus on the issues they have identified as priorities related to violence prevention, response and reporting, as well as participation and empowerment. The report serves also to identify trends around children's participation and provides recommendations for the broader protection community, Member States, United Nations entities and the private sector. The Office of the Special Representative is also preparing a digital and interactive version to promote and amplify children's actions and initiatives.

86. As indicated in the report, children are already part of the solution to violence: they are working with decision makers and Governments, supporting their communities, building their capacities and those of their peers, advancing research and expressing themselves. The experiences analysed show that children increased their engagement during the pandemic to support their peers and communities in order to prevent, respond to and report violence against children. The results signal a rapid shift from offline to online engagement and have informed the Special Representative's strategy with the industry to better understand how children use online means to enhance their own protection.

87. Also highlighted in the report is the critical role of peer networks in violence prevention and protection, and in mental health support. The mapping shows that children are instrumental in connecting other children to reporting services and protection resources, that they educate their peers about violence and that they help each other with the realization of being, or having been, victims of violence. As noted, children are aware of their own mental health needs and those of their peers, and they support each other through peer networks and safe spaces, both offline and online. They also know their own limits and understand the need to connect with appropriate protection services for the sake of their own mental health. These actions have helped to inform the advocacy of the Special Representative on access by children to mental health services.

88. In order to promote the actions of children as agents of change, the Special Representative invited children from all regions who were working on mental health issues to share videos of their recommendations on improving mental health and well-being. The videos were shared with States and world leaders at a high-level event on mental health during the high-level political forum and through the Special Representative's digital channels dedicated to raising awareness of children's actions in these areas.

²⁹ UNICEF, "Alternatives to immigration detention of children" (New York, February 2019).

³⁰ International Detention Coalition, "Room for hope: International Detention Coalition briefing note – an overview of promising alternatives to detention in the era of COVID-19" (Melbourne, October 2020); see also End Immigration Detention of Children, "There are alternatives", web page (<https://endchilddetention.org/solution/there-are-alternatives/>).

89. During the reporting period, the Special Representative participated in many activities that involved children, including to reach out to over 48,000 children through different channels, venues and opportunities organized by or with civil society organizations and United Nations entities, including the Global Youth Summit convened by the Big 6 Youth Organizations, an alliance of the six largest youth-led organizations in the world.³¹ She encouraged participants at the Summit to take action to prevent and respond to violence against children. Participating children and young people prioritized educating their peers on violence and training youth on how and where to report violence, while remaining committed to taking concrete action in their communities.

VII. The way forward

90. The social and economic costs of violence against children undermine efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda and hinder progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The negative and long-term impact of violence on the development of children stifles their potential to become engaged and productive citizens, robbing nations of vital human capital. The continuing pressure of having to deal with the repercussions of violence against children places a heavy burden on the health, education, welfare and justice systems of States, diverting scarce resources that could be better spent elsewhere.

91. In order to accelerate progress towards achieving the Goals, efforts to end violence against children should be integrated into every national development agenda. Prevention is the most effective way to end such violence, and a growing pool of evidence is available to demonstrate successful approaches that are also relatively low cost. An integrated, multisectoral and coherent national development agenda will also address the drivers of violence, such as poverty, inequality, gender discrimination, migration, exclusion and humanitarian crises, among other challenges.

92. The fiscal constraints on Governments that are likely to follow as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may set back efforts to strengthen the provision of social services for children, and policymakers will need to be convinced of the sound economic case for maintaining funding for them. The most compelling rationale for continued funding contrasts the clear benefits of comparatively modest spending on prevention with the vast short- and long-term costs of inaction – a rationale that should be mobilized to persuade Governments to make the necessary allocations.

93. In its report entitled *Investing in Human Capital for a Resilient Recovery: The Role of Public Finance*, which was issued in 2021, the World Bank outlined the role of public finance in building and protecting human capital as countries seek to recover from the pandemic. The World Bank called on Governments to ensure the adequacy, efficiency and sustainability of public spending on services that support the formation of human capital (in sectors such as health, education and social protection), particularly during periods of fiscal tightening. In June 2021, UNICEF issued a report entitled “Financing an inclusive recovery for children: a call to action”, in which the case was also made for prioritizing social sectors in public spending, even in the face of economic recession and fiscal challenges.

94. The Office of the Special Representative is working with partners, including States, the United Nations system, financial institutions, academia and civil society organizations to gather and strengthen evidence for the investment case for ending violence against children. The investment case will inform advocacy with Governments and development partners to ensure that adequate funding for the

³¹ Big 6 Youth Organizations, “A global youth-led movement for change” (<https://bigsix.org/>).

prevention of and response to violence against children is integrated into the budgets of such sectors as health (including mental health), education, child protection and social welfare, justice and inclusive social protection systems.

95. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that a paradigm shift in favour of children is long overdue – a shift that treats spending on integrated social services and social protection measures for children and their caregivers as investments that are vital for an inclusive, resilient and sustainable post-pandemic recovery. The Special Representative calls on all States to ensure that this paradigm shift is reflected in every national development and economic recovery plan to maximize its impact for every child and their caregivers, and to ensure that no one is left behind.
