

Child Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents the highest aspirations for a bright future for the world’s children and is a crucial opportunity to realize the rights of the child worldwide. It provides a clear framework for implementation and aims to improve children’s lives through a universal agenda with clear goals and targets. Fulfilling children’s rights is a prerequisite for realizing the 2030 Agenda.

Considerable progress has been made towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since 2015. Children are in better health and stay in education for longer, and the under-5 mortality rate fell to 39 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2017, a 6.7% decrease from 2015.¹ However, progress also remains slow. Conflicts, environmental, financial, health and humanitarian crises place children at risk of multiple rights violations, violence, marginalization, and discrimination. More than half of children and adolescents do not meet minimum literacy and numeracy standards,² and an estimated 250 million children under 5 in low- and middle-income countries may not reach developmental potential.³ Furthermore, children are more than twice as likely as adults to live in poverty. Approximately 663 million live in “multi-dimensionally poor” households, lacking necessities such as nutrition or clean water. 385 million are estimated to live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than USD\$1.90 a day.⁴ Overall, 945 million children live in countries where the SDGs remain out of reach.⁵ Without accelerated action, systematic, concrete implementation and lasting solutions at the international, regional, national, and local levels, the SDGs will not be met by 2030 and children will continue to be left behind.

The 2030 Agenda reaffirms States’ obligations regarding children’s rights by framing implementation in line with obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. The application of human rights standards and principles, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, are also a crucial means through which the SDGs can be achieved.

In 2017, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 31/7, the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) presented a report on the protection of the rights of the child in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It established the interlinked nature of the rights of the child and the 2030 Agenda, highlighting that all SDGs and targets, while not explicitly naming children, are linked to protecting and promoting children’s rights.⁶

In line with resolution 37/20, OHCHR provides child rights inputs to the annual progress reviews on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).⁷ This inputs paper reflects the responses to the call for submissions: 14 were received from States, 1 from national human rights institutions, 1 from UN entities and 8 from civil society.

¹ Sustainable Development Goal 3, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg3>.

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), <http://data.uis.unesco.org/?lang=en&SubSessionId=c254068b-d342-4926-82b6-3555c2b6840e&themetreeid=-200>.

³ The Lancet Commissions, “A future for the world’s children? A WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission,” p. 611.

⁴ United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), “Child poverty,” <https://www.unicef.org/social-policy/child-poverty>.

⁵ UNICEF, “Progress for Every Child in the SDG Era: Are we on track to achieve the SDGs for children? The situation in 2019,” <https://data.unicef.org/resources/progress-for-every-child-in-the-sdg-era-2019/>.

⁶ A/HRC/34/27.

⁷ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/16641OHCHR.pdf>;
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24291OHCHR_ChildRightsReport_HLPF_July19.pdf.

Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

At the 2019 Sustainable Development Goals Summit, States called for multi-level, multi-stakeholder accelerated action to ensure that no one is left behind. In particular, targeted measures to support those people and countries at greatest risk of being left behind, durable solutions, and addressing systemic implementation gaps are essential to realizing the SDGs by 2030.⁸ Human rights, which underpin the 2030 Agenda, can transform implementation, and the Agenda itself provides a guide to accelerated action. As the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs starts, proactive, multi-sectoral measures will transform and accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

Human and children's rights are essential accelerators for implementing the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda has integrated human rights into its goals and targets. Therefore, respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights can act as a catalyst for implementing the Agenda and a driver for change in sustainable development. This is underpinned by the crucial role of human rights processes and actors in accelerating progress, which can help states to identify practices and measures towards inclusive sustainable development. Human rights are also instrumental in empowering people to claim their rights, thereby mobilizing them around the 2030 Agenda.⁹ Accelerated action should not negatively affect the protection and promotion of human rights, nor impede a human rights-based approach.

The data available on child-related SDG indicators varies between low-, medium- and high-income countries.¹⁰ Effective and targeted collection and measuring of data are central to implementing the 2030 Agenda. Analysis should focus on the indicators and data required to inform processes on how to implement the SDGs in an accelerated, effective manner.

Given the synergies between sustainable development and human rights, human rights reporting and analysis, using available data on States' human rights progress, can accelerate and transform States' implementation of the SDGs. It helps to identify discrimination, inequality and those groups most at risk of being left behind, and provide appropriate responses. Recommendations from human rights mechanisms and processes such as treaty bodies, the Universal Periodic Review, and Special Procedures highlight actions States can take to target those furthest behind and ensure that no child is left behind. This data must be better utilised to inform and strengthen implementation of and reporting on the SDGs.¹¹ Knowledge-sharing and exchange of national-level best practices at the HLPF and the Human Rights Council are crucial for an effective implementation which leaves no one is left behind.¹²

A child rights-based approach to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

A universal, integrated approach is needed to implement the 2030 Agenda in a manner which protects and promotes children's rights, recognizing the relevance of all SDGs to all children, their rights, well-being and development in all countries at all stages of their childhood. The 2030 Agenda is closely aligned with the indivisible, inalienable and universal nature of children's rights. In particular, inequality, poverty and discrimination, which are central to the Agenda, are intergenerational and significantly affect the realization of children's rights and children's well-being worldwide.

⁸ A/RES/74/4.

⁹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), "Push no one behind," <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/push-no-one-behind/>.

¹⁰ The Lancet Commissions, "A future for the world's children?" p. 635.

¹¹ A/HRC/43/33, para.88.

¹² Ibid., para.64.

The child rights and sustainable development agendas are mutually-reinforcing. Children’s rights can guide effective delivery, in which all children, including those most marginalized and at greatest risk of being left behind, are reached. A rights-based approach to sustainable development can strengthen human rights implementation at all levels and advance children’s rights.¹³

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, States must respect, protect and fulfil the Convention rights without discrimination. The Convention is the primary legal framework that establishes State obligations regarding the rights of the child, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child assesses State compliance with the Convention and its Optional Protocols. The Convention provides a comprehensive framework of rights that are central to the SDGs, including health, education, housing, adequate standard of living, social security, non-discrimination, protection from violence and exploitation, participation, and the freedoms of expression, assembly and information, among others. Therefore, respecting, protecting and fulfilling children’s rights also means achieving universal sustainable development.

All the SDGs and targets must be implemented in line with the Convention and its Optional Protocols as well as the Committee’s General Comments. Furthermore, States must not undertake implementation activities that would risk undermining the rights of the child, directly or indirectly.¹⁴

In order to ensure that children’s rights are fully realized and that children are not left behind in the implementation of the SDGs, a systematic child rights-based approach with the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the centre is required. Child rights principles should guide the Agenda’s implementation, particularly non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and participation. States must adopt a comprehensive approach prioritizing children’s rights and integrating them into the formulation, planning, implementation, monitoring, follow-up and review of development frameworks, policies, programmes and projects.¹⁵

A child rights-based approach is multi-pronged, multi-level, realizes all civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, and recognizes the inherent links between sustainable development and children’s rights. States should ensure child participation, involve national human rights institutions, and conduct child rights impact assessments that examine the effects of proposed actions on children and fully respect children’s rights.

The Convention provides a strong framework and opportunity for States to be held accountable regarding their implementation of the 2030 Agenda in a manner which promotes and protects the rights of the child.¹⁶ Strong multi-stakeholder accountability mechanisms at the national, regional and global levels are also essential.¹⁷ States should adopt a participatory approach to accountability, which facilitates the identification and sharing of information regarding implementation gaps and those left behind, and informs States’ actions. States should adopt proactive measures, e.g., through providing safe spaces and mechanisms for children to participate and timely, “child-friendly” information.¹⁸

¹³ Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), “Contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in response to a call for inputs by the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development,” March 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRC/HLPoliticalForumSustainableDevelopment.pdf>; A/HRC/34/27, para. 18.

¹⁴ A/HRC/34/27, para.7.

¹⁵ CRC, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRC/HLPoliticalForumSustainableDevelopment.pdf>; A/HRC/34/27; A/HRC/43/33.

¹⁶ The Lancet Commissions, “A future for the world’s children?” p. 626.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ A/HRC/34/7, para.51; The Lancet Commissions, “A future for the world’s children?” p. 628.

Inequalities are exacerbated by certain situations and factors and some children face multiple intersecting forms of discrimination, including on the basis of gender, disability, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity. Children at greatest risk of being left behind also include those affected by poverty, in street situations, in rural or marginalized communities, affected by conflict or emergencies, migrant, asylum-seeking, refugee and internally-displaced children, indigenous children, children whose births have not been registered, those in alternative care, living with HIV/AIDS, engaged in child labour, child victims of violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and children in detention. States must implement the SDGs without discriminating directly or indirectly against all children, and consider those children at greatest risk of being left behind.

States must adequately invest in children, prioritizing those in situations of vulnerability. States' child-centred sustainable development policy must rely on an evidence-based understanding of the reality at local and national levels. This involves information-sharing, the systematic collection of quality, disaggregated data, and a human rights approach to data and monitoring.¹⁹

Children as Agents of Change in the 2030 Agenda

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the participation of rights-holders as partners in implementation.²⁰ It recognises children's role as active citizens in society and social transformation, and ensures their right to participate in actions and decision-making processes affecting them, in accordance with their age and maturity. Child participation is critical for the successful implementation of a universal sustainable development that leaves no child behind, and will accelerate the protection, respect and fulfilment of children's rights under the Convention. Children should be systematically involved in SDG processes, implementation, and monitoring, and in policy and programme design.

Leaving No Child Behind

A critical element of the 2030 Agenda is the commitment to "leave no one behind," especially those in vulnerable situations. This includes children. By pledging to leave no one behind, States committed to ensure equality and reduce inequalities, including through eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices. This principle is grounded in the human rights principles of non-discrimination, equality and dignity, and provides an entry point for protecting and promoting the rights of the child.

Sustainable development frameworks, strategies, policies and programmes must integrate children's rights to ensure that no child is left behind. The principle of leaving no child behind must also be integrated into all monitoring and review processes, including the Voluntary National Reviews, regional social development fora, HLPF and human rights processes. Strong, effective inclusive participatory processes and institutions are critical for empowering groups at risk of being left behind and will help ensure that no child is left behind.

National-level implementation of the rights of the child in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development **Voluntary National Reviews**

In order for the 2030 Agenda to be delivered effectively, States must localize and implement the SDGs at national level and monitor and report regularly on progress. Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ A/HRC/43/33, para. 16.

an essential part of the follow-up and review mechanisms of the Agenda, and aim to track annual progress, assess and share knowledge on national-level implementation, strengthen policies and institutions, and mobilize partnerships. They are a voluntary, multi-stakeholder, State-led process and involve State reports, regional fora and national consultations. States self-report and present at the HLPF, where they share their challenges and lessons learned in implementation. States have engaged strongly: 22 presented in 2016, 43 in 2017, 46 in 2018, and 47 in 2019, with 51 scheduled in 2020.²¹

The VNR process and quality of reports have evolved and improved since 2016, with additional analysis being incorporated and a stronger focus on implementation when States present for second reviews.²² Some States have reported on human rights.²³ However, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) has found that many VNRs do not demonstrate a comprehensive approach to the 2030 Agenda, focusing on specific goals and thereby ignoring the indivisible and integrated nature of the Agenda.²⁴

Most VNRs address children in the context of leave no one behind. The CDP's analysis of VNRs from 2017–2019 found that Leave No One Behind (LNOB) was included in a largely rhetorical fashion. VNRs lacked details on commitments to reach those furthest behind, implementation of LNOB and measures to avoid pushing anyone further behind. In 2017, only 19 of 43 reviews included explicit implementation strategies for LNOB. Twenty of 46 in 2018 mentioned commitments to reach those furthest behind, but only some of those referenced concrete implementation strategies.²⁵ Such lack of detailed information regarding implementing LNOB indicates a possible lack of transformative and structural implementation at ground level.²⁶ Lower middle income countries struggled to present national and disaggregated statistics for some child-related indicators at VNRs.²⁷

Children in Voluntary National Reviews

Children and youth feature prominently among the groups at greatest risk of being left behind in VNRs. Forty-three of 46 reports mentioned children in 2018, an increase from 31 of 43 in 2017.²⁸ In 2019, several reviews focused on children, including orphans, child soldiers, and trafficked and street children, among others, and on actions to prevent them from being left behind due to violence, poverty, malnutrition or lack of access to quality education.²⁹

OHCHR analysed the “key messages” documents that accompanied each State report for the VNRs from 2016-2019. Children were mentioned in several reports, often through the use of specific terms or groups, including girls, new-borns and infants. The inclusion of children varied depending on the thematic focus of the annual review and the goals under review. In 2019, several Goals directly linked to children - e.g. Goals 4 and 16 - were reviewed. This analysis suggests that States could further apply a systemic, integrated child rights approach to the 2030 Agenda that recognizes the universal and indivisible nature of the Agenda and of children's rights.

²¹ Voluntary National Reviews Database, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.

²² https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17298Geneva_VNR_workshop_report_final_1201.pdf.

²³ A/HRC/43/33, para.51.

²⁴ CDP, “Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – 2019,” <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/CDP-excerpt-2019-2.pdf>.

²⁵ Ibid.; DESA, CDP, “Voluntary National Review reports – What do they (not) tell us?,”

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/voluntary-national-reviews-reports-what-do-they-not-tell-us/>.

²⁶ DESA, CDP, “‘Leaving no one behind’ as a site of contestation and reinterpretation,”

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/post/CDP-bp-2018-47.pdf>; “Voluntary National Review reports – What do they (not) tell us?”

²⁷ The Lancet Commissions, “A future for the world's children?” p. 637.

²⁸ DESA, CDP, “Voluntary National Review reports – What do they (not) tell us?”

²⁹ 2019 Voluntary National Reviews.

While more needs to be done to integrate the rights of the child systematically into state policies, the VNR process has increasingly allowed for the identification and sharing of concrete examples of applying a child rights perspective to national-level implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In 2019, 40 of 47 VNRs mentioned protecting children from violence highlighting measures including national, integrated and multi-sectoral plans and policies, dedicated budgets, enacting or reforming legislation, and strengthening institutions and partnerships. Several VNRs reported children's role as stakeholders in the implementation processes.³⁰

Sierra Leone's 2019 VNR included policies and initiatives to ensure universal free access to basic and senior secondary education, end child marriage and reduce teen pregnancy.³¹ Vanuatu highlighted programmes and policies on child and online protection and equal access to education, including early childhood education.³² Chad noted progress on realizing children's rights,³³ New Zealand highlighted concrete measures to address child poverty,³⁴ and Iceland particularly focused on children, incorporating child participation and children's views.³⁵ Colombia has included actions taken to advance the rights of those furthest behind, including children.³⁶

Good practices towards leaving no child behind

Some States, civil society and other actors have taken measures to realize children's rights in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Several good practices highlighted in the submissions received have been included below as well as examples cited in other fora. Existing good practices should be used to inform and enhance national and intergovernmental action.

Albania's National Agenda for the Rights of the Children was developed in consultation with children. Children will participate for a two-year period in two meetings of the National Council for the Rights and Protection of Children annually.³⁷

Bolivia's Economic and Social Development Plan 2016-2020 contains 13 pillars related to the SDGs. It integrates children's rights and includes a normative framework and actions for the comprehensive protection of the rights of children and adolescents.³⁸

Brunei Darussalam has introduced measures to ensure universal healthcare and lifelong education for children and is currently developing its National Framework on Child Protection.³⁹

³⁰ Submission from the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General.

³¹ Sierra Leone, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23012Sierra_Leone_Key_SDGs_Messages.pdf.

³² Vanuatu,

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23033Vanuatu_Republic_of_Vanuatu_VNR_Key_Messages_18May19final.pdf.

³³ Chad, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/22904Chad_Messages_cles_ENV_Tchad.pdf.

³⁴ New Zealand,

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/22910New_Zealand_SDGs_VNR_Key_Messages_16_May_FINAL.pdf.

³⁵ Iceland,

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23051Iceland_Mainmessages_VNR_Iceland_17052019_final_to_publish.pdf.

³⁶ Submission from Colombia.

³⁷ Submission from Albania.

³⁸ Submission from Bolivia.

³⁹ Submission from Brunei Darussalam

Colombia's priorities for a child rights perspective to implementing the SDGs include overcoming child poverty, ending all malnutrition through food security, inclusive, equitable and quality education, and equality for and empowerment of women and girls, including eliminating all forms of violence.⁴⁰

Costa Rica assesses minority groups when implementing the 2030 Agenda, for example, by helping students stay in education.⁴¹

The Côte d'Ivoire's initiatives to implement the SDGs from a child rights perspective include policies to reduce poverty and inequality, increase school enrolment and meet SDG 4, and increased access to healthcare. The Children's Parliament supports public authorities in implementing the national child protection policy and awareness-raising.⁴²

Germany has promoted child participation in the 2030 Agenda, including through competitions to strengthen child rights, focusing on those left behind. It implemented the "Agents of Change – Child and youth rights in German development cooperation activities" Action Plan, which is based on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, refers to the 2030 Agenda and LNOB, identifies children as a disadvantaged group, and was developed with the participation of young people.⁴³

Ghana is strengthening its child protection system through policies and strategies addressing child and family welfare, justice for children, and ending child marriage and child labour.⁴⁴

Italy integrates the SDGs into economic, social and environmental programming through its National Sustainable Development Strategy 2017-2030. This includes specific actions for protecting and promoting children's rights, including financial measures to support families affected by poverty and combat child education poverty, and involving children. The National Sustainable Development Strategy includes physical, sexual and psychological violence against children.⁴⁵

Mozambique's initiatives to improve children's well-being and reinforce SDGs' implementation include the 2018 Social Action and Gender Policies, legislation to prevent early marriage, the national education system law, and the National Action Plan for Children, with actions on health, nutrition, education, protection and participation. Mozambique has held child parliamentary sessions at the national, provincial and district levels in which children reflected on their rights and raised their concerns with the government and partners.⁴⁶

In 2020, Oman launched a child-friendly education system, which integrates children with disabilities and creates an environment focused on participation, inclusion, protection, equality, resilience and sustainability. Oman has established several child protection mechanisms under its Child Law to protect and promote the rights of the child, including preventing violence against children.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Submission from Colombia.

⁴¹ A/HRC/43/3, paras.68-70.

⁴² Submission from Côte d'Ivoire.

⁴³ Submission from Germany.

⁴⁴ 2019 Voluntary National Reviews.

⁴⁵ Submission from Italy.

⁴⁶ Submission from Mozambique.

⁴⁷ Submission from Oman.

The Republic of Ireland's SDGs National Implementation Plan prioritizes children's rights, child participation, and support for children to realize their maximum potential. Targeted measures include a roadmap to reduce poverty with a new target on child poverty, initiatives to reduce childhood obesity and improve child health and wellbeing, measures for universal, quality education, a strategy for child participation in decision-making, and targeted funding for marginalized, vulnerable young people.⁴⁸

Spain has integrated the SDGs into national planning and public policies, developed a national action plan for implementation and a national strategy for the prevention and fight against poverty and social exclusion, which includes child poverty, and established a specific General Directorate for Children's Rights and Adolescence. Spain prioritizes those children affected by poverty, exclusion and discrimination and migrant children in its VNRs.⁴⁹

The United Arab Emirates' Childhood and Motherhood Strategy aims to further implementation of the 2030 Agenda by ensuring children's and mothers' right to comprehensive care within a sustainable healthy environment, a strengthened, integrated and comprehensive child protection system, children's right to quality learning opportunities, and child participation in all fields.⁵⁰

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has adopted several inclusive policies aimed at children, including a social mobility plan to build an inclusive education system and leave no child behind by targeting efforts and resources at those most in need. It has also integrated the SDGs into its curriculum.⁵¹

Denmark, Ecuador, the Philippines and Switzerland have acted to protect education during armed conflict, including protections for schools from military use.⁵²

Azerbaijan and Tonga have taken measures to raise children's awareness of the SDGs through formal education curricula.⁵³

Indonesia and Vanuatu have taken steps to strengthen national and municipal systems for child participation.⁵⁴

Mauritius, Mongolia and the Philippines have organized conferences for children to participate and express their views on SDGs.⁵⁵

Serbia has used data to gauge children's inputs to the 2030 Agenda review process.⁵⁶

Turkey has introduced measures targeted at child participation and empowering children through trainings.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ Submission from Republic of Ireland.

⁴⁹ A/HRC/43/33, para. 63; Submission from Spain.

⁵⁰ Submission from United Arab Emirates.

⁵¹ Submission from United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

⁵² Submission from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.

⁵³ Submission from the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Submission from Turkey.

As of March 2020, 30% of States have prohibited all corporal punishment of children and, where research is available, these laws have been found to accelerate progress in reducing corporal punishment and transforming attitudes around violence in childrearing and education.⁵⁸

The Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII is applying a child rights-based approach to measures and programmes in different countries in the framework of the 2030 Agenda.⁵⁹

Plan International's Champions of Change community-wide programme engages and empowers boys and girls to challenge harmful social norms and promote gender equality in over 40 countries.⁶⁰

Child rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastating short-, medium- and long-term consequences for children and their rights and poses a significant challenge to the realization of the 2030 Agenda. It can also have a grave physical, emotional and psychological effect on children, especially in countries which have established mandatory stay-at-home, lockdown or confinement measures and for children in situations of vulnerability.⁶¹ While children who contract COVID-19 seem to have fewer symptoms and lower mortality rates than other groups, there are several immediate socio-economic impacts directly affecting children and child protection risks that are emerging daily due to the measures taken to prevent and contain the virus.

Stay-at-home orders, lockdowns and confinement measures have severe effects on children's rights to physical and mental health, education, play, family environment and freedom from violence, among others. Children may be confined in homes that are overcrowded or do not meet the adequate standard of living.⁶² Children in vulnerable situations such as those on the move, in conflict zones, in detention, or street children may not have access to an adequate standard of living, including housing, food, water, sanitation and hygiene. Furthermore, children's rights to information, participation, and access to justice are often not being respected, protected and fulfilled in State responses to the pandemic.

The right to education has been disrupted for more than 1.5 billion children globally as 188 countries have closed schools.⁶³ Online learning is being employed as an alternative and more than two-thirds of countries have introduced a national distance learning platform. However, before the pandemic, almost one-third of young people worldwide were digitally excluded.⁶⁴ Therefore, children who have limited or no access to technology and/or the Internet or inadequate support from family may not be able to access education and risk falling further behind.⁶⁵

COVID-19 poses a significant threat to children's rights to survival and development and highest attainable standard of health. The physical and mental health impacts are significant, particularly confinement and physical distancing. Access to key services, including both basic and lifesaving health

⁵⁸ Submission from Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children.

⁵⁹ Submission from Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII.

⁶⁰ Submission from Plan International.

⁶¹ CRC, COVID-19 statement,

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CRC_STA_9095_E.pdf.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ UNESCO, "COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response," <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

⁶⁴ UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children."

⁶⁵ CRC, Covid-19 statement.

care and services such as vaccinations, have been disrupted. Child deaths could increase due to financial hardship and the global economic downturn. Furthermore, child nutrition is of vital concern as some children cannot regularly access nutritious food during lockdown or because of financial hardship related to COVID-19. 368.5 million children in 143 countries normally rely on school meals for daily nutritious meals.⁶⁶

Lockdowns and confinement can expose children to increased risk of witnessing or experiencing physical and psychological violence, including maltreatment and sexual violence.⁶⁷ There is a heightened risk of exposure to inappropriate online content and online predators because of increased use of online platforms, including for distance learning.⁶⁸ Girls are particularly at risk and face increased threats of sexual violence, exploitation, discrimination and abuse.⁶⁹ Children on the move, in conflict zones, and street children also face increased risk of violence due to instability, uncertainty and/or an inability to comply with virus-related lockdown measures.

COVID-19 disproportionately affects those living in poverty and the poorest countries, including children. It exacerbates existing inequalities and risks pushing those affected by poverty deeper into poverty. Low-income and conflict-affected countries are less likely to be able to respond effectively due to weaker health and social protection systems, fewer households with access to technology and internet for distance learning, and more of the population lack access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.⁷⁰

As a result of COVID-19, millions of children will face poverty as their families face financial hardship due to illness, an inability to work, loss of employment and income, and other related economic insecurity. In addition to the estimated 386 million children living in extreme poverty, an estimated 42-66 million children could face extreme poverty due to COVID-19.⁷¹ There is also an increased risk of children being pushed into child labour to support their families and, for girls in particular, of early, child or forced marriage and exploitation and trafficking.⁷²

Leaving No Child Behind in COVID-19 responses

COVID-19 has demonstrated how societal inequalities affect enjoyment of children's rights, particularly health, survival and development, education, and adequate standard of living, among others. The pandemic has already exacerbated these inequalities and risks having a long-term effect on the realization of the 2030 Agenda. This will in turn negatively affect children and the realization of their rights, particularly those already at risk of being left behind.

Furthermore, government responses risk further exacerbating existing inequalities for the most marginalized children and those in vulnerable situations. Their impact will disproportionately affect certain groups, including children living in poverty or the poorest countries and neighbourhoods, in street situations, migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee children, child victims of trafficking or

⁶⁶ UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children."

⁶⁷ <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/un-rights-experts-call-urgent-action-mitigate-heightened-risks-violence-against-children>; Agenda for Action, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/COVID-19/Agenda_for_Action_IAWG-VAC.pdf.

⁶⁸ UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children."

⁶⁹ Plan International, "Girls at the center of the COVID-19 response," <https://plan-international.org/un/girls-center-covid19-response>.

⁷⁰ UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children."

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Human Rights Watch, "COVID-19's Devastating Impact on Children," <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/covid-19s-devastating-impact-children>; Plan International, "Girls at the center of the COVID-19 response."

smuggling, children affected by conflict, minority and indigenous children, children with underlying health conditions including HIV/AIDS, and children with disabilities. It will particularly affect children deprived of liberty, who live in crowded or unhygienic conditions and are often more vulnerable to abuse and neglect.⁷³

Indeed, the pandemic may not just delay implementation of the 2030 Agenda, it risks reversing significant progress made since its adoption. In their responses to COVID-19, States must adopt an effective, human rights-based response that protects and benefits those in most vulnerable situations while advancing efforts to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights and achieve the 2030 Agenda.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Human rights and the 2030 Agenda aim to ensure children and future generations live with dignity and thrive. With ten years to realize the SDGs, States must move from rhetorical, political commitments to concrete, targeted implementation at all levels in order to ensure that universal sustainable development which protects and promotes the rights of the child becomes a reality on the ground.

As States accelerate and transform their implementation of the SDGs, the rights of the child should serve as the compass to guide effective delivery. States should consider:

- Ensuring all processes related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are systematically guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, particularly non-discrimination, best interests of the child, right to life, survival and development, and the right to participation.
- Mainstreaming a comprehensive child rights approach to the 2030 Agenda through the formulation, planning, implementation, monitoring, follow-up and review processes of development frameworks, policies, programmes and projects that respects, protects and fulfils the rights of the child.
- Adopting targeted measures to reach those children left furthest behind in national action plans, strategies, policies and budgets, including by assessing and prioritizing their specific circumstances, needs and vulnerabilities.
- Amending legislation, standards and policies as necessary to ensure that they are not discriminatory – either directly or indirectly, considering that specific groups are at greater risk of being left behind. States should consider the possible adoption of temporary special measures to address inequality and reach those furthest behind.
- Ensuring systematic monitoring and collate and disseminate transparent accurate data concerning children and the 2030 Agenda, disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, religion, disability and other relevant criteria, to inform sustainable development planning in a manner that protects and promotes the rights of the child. States should involve national statistical offices and support them in a human-rights based approach to data collection.

⁷³ For more on children deprived of liberty, see Technical Note: COVID-19 and Children Deprived of their Liberty: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Detention/ChildrenDeprivedofLibertyandCOVID.pdf>.

- Integrating a child rights perspective in budgeting processes in line with the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment no. 19 on public budgeting for the realization of children's rights and the OHCHR report on towards better investment in the rights of the child (A/HRC/28/33). This can be achieved through targeted investment strategies to reach all children and prioritizing those furthest behind, specific allocations to children in all relevant sectors, dedicated indicators and a tracking system to monitor and evaluate the distribution of resources.
- In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognizing children as rights-holders with the evolving capacity to participate and ensure their meaningful participation in all issues and processes affecting them related to the implementation, monitoring and follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda.
- Ensuring effective, child-friendly measures and mechanisms are in place to ensure State accountability regarding implementation of the 2030 Agenda in a manner that protects and promotes children's rights.
- Establishing multi-stakeholder partnerships at all levels – international, regional and national, and local – including international and regional organizations, the public and private sectors, civil society, and children to implement the 2030 Agenda.
- Strengthening reporting on child rights and sustainable development and use recommendations from human rights mechanisms and processes to inform sustainable development planning, reporting, and the implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. Ensure that national human rights institutions are involved in reporting in order to strengthen implementation.
- Adopting an effective, child rights-based response to emergencies, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, which protects and benefits those in most vulnerable situations, while advancing efforts to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights and achieve the 2030 Agenda. States should pay increased attention to child protection and child rights in emergency responses, maintain the provision of basic services including healthcare, water, sanitation, education and birth registration, and take targeted measures to protect children in vulnerable situations. The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration.