



**76<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly**  
**High-level Side Event**  
***Protection of Children: Invisible Victims of Armed Conflict & Covid-19***

**23 September 2021**

Highlights and recommendations from a high-level side event  
at the 76<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly

## **THE EVENT**

The proliferation of armed conflict and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic have been twin disasters for children around the world. They have exposed children to ever greater threats, exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, and worsened protection needs. As is so often the case, girls have disproportionately borne the brunt of the impact. Hard-won gains risk being lost in the fields of protection, child health, education, and poverty reduction. This generational challenge requires a global response.

It is in this context that the European Union (EU) and the Kingdom of Belgium co-organised the 2021 high-level side event at the 76<sup>th</sup> United Nations (UN) General Assembly on the ***Protection of Children: Invisible Victims of Armed Conflict & COVID-19***. The event was co-hosted by the Republic of Niger and Save the Children, and co-sponsored by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Office of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The event focused on approaches that will protect, and build back better for children affected by armed conflict and ensure no child remains invisible in the recovery process from COVID-19.

Participants heard compelling testimonies from two South Sudanese children and a young woman refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, currently living in Sweden. Their contributions framed two subsequent panel discussions. The first focused on the increase of grave violations against children in armed conflict, gender-based violence, and refugee protection issues. The second highlighted the impact of service disruptions as a consequence of the pandemic, including health, mental health, and education services, as well as food insecurity.

The event had 200 participants and featured high-level interventions from the floor. The following countries and organisations intervened (in chronological order): Estonia, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Malta, Yemen, Norway, Germany, Spain, US, Portugal, Turkey and Geneva Call.

# INTRODUCTION

Summarised below are core themes from the UNGA76 event, with extracts from official statements delivered by governments, the UN, and humanitarian agencies. The event discussed the challenges and drew lessons from them, ending with a call to member states, humanitarian, development and peace organizations, practitioners, and decision makers to address the issues raised.

## BACKGROUND

- The COVID-crisis has aggravated the situation for millions of children globally, particularly the 426 million living in conflict areas<sup>[1]</sup>, as the worsening socio-economic conditions, lockdowns and school closures have brought further threats<sup>[2]</sup>. The latest Secretary-General report on Children and Armed Conflict states that almost 20.000 boys and girls in 21 situations of concern directly suffered grave violations against them in 2020<sup>[3]</sup>. And yet, during armed conflict, the plight of children as well as the short, medium and long-term effects of conflict and violence on them are often overlooked.
- The pandemic increased the vulnerability of conflict-affected children to the six grave violations, including abduction, recruitment and use, sexual violence and attacks on schools and hospitals. At the same time, isolation and measures put in place to combat the pandemic complicated the work of UN child protection staff, made access to services extremely challenging, and impeded humanitarian access.
- From a humanitarian perspective, children affected by armed conflict are at much higher risk of being exposed to broader protection concerns, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this trend.
- The pandemic negatively impacted public health systems already strained by armed conflicts and led to closures of schools and other education facilities. Meanwhile, widespread attacks against schools and hospitals continued and even increased in certain areas. On certain occasions, restrictions impeded the safe and rapid access for frontline medical and humanitarian workers to people in need.
- With school closures, movement restrictions and the loss or reduction of household income as a consequence of the pandemic, families increasingly resorted to negative coping mechanisms and the school drop-out rate has increased – particularly for girls. Consequently, children are more exposed to recruitment and use by armed groups, child labor, including the worst forms of child labor, sexual violence and human trafficking, as well as child, early and forced marriage and teenage pregnancies. Child marriage is among the most common risks for displaced girls identified over the last five years. There is furthermore a risk of gender imbalances within the family when girls are increasingly expected to perform household duties, chores and caring responsibilities.
- Furthermore, movement restrictions, lockdowns and border closures hampered the work to reconnect and reunite families, including refugee parents and children, separated by war and violence. Cross-border family reunifications came to a near-standstill, and reduced access to refugee camps further hindered efforts to trace missing family members. Fears of contracting COVID-19 by potential foster families meant identifying appropriate family-based alternative care for newly separated children and children whose parents died. For children deprived of liberty, COVID-19 has meant the limitation of family visits, often cutting off valuable lifelines for children who want to maintain contact with their loved ones and, more pragmatically, receive food, clothing and medicine.
- Together with the impact of confinement measures, these challenges have increased the risk for children to be exposed to all forms of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence. In displacement contexts, risks of violence, harassment or abuse of displaced children increased by 10 per cent in 2020 compared to the previous year. Depriving children of care, education and health services jeopardizes their chances of a healthy and prosperous life. The mental health and psychological well-being of children deteriorates as they struggle to cope with the socio-economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their safety.
- One in 10 children globally has a disability. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls with disabilities were exposed to higher rates of gender-based violence, and children with disabilities experienced discrimination, neglect, abuse and violence. Children with disabilities are among the world's most vulnerable, marginalized and stigmatized populations, with COVID-19 further exposing them to the risk of abuse and violence.

## ACHOL AND MABIOR'S TESTIMONY

Achol and Mabior, two children from the world's newest country, South Sudan, addressed the panel to share their perspectives on the impact of hunger, COVID-19, and conflict. They brought with them quotes they had collected from other South Sudanese children from five different communities.

They discussed the physical symptoms of severe hunger and malnutrition, including feeling weak, dizzy, nauseous, and slow.

- *"I never get up from bed in the morning, I remain crying whenever we spend night without food to eat at our home" said a young boy.*

Achol and Mabior underscored that hunger and malnutrition go far beyond the physical.

- *"Some boys engage in violent acts, like stealing, robbery, petty crime, and some girls are sexually exploited, as a means of generating income for food. Other ways of coping with hunger include playing games with other children and reading to distract from the feeling of hunger, sharing meals, reducing food intake and eating from wild trees."*

Lack of resources can often be difficult to understand for children.

- *"I sometimes lose love with parents since they are not providing needs like clothes to attend community functions" said a teenage boy.*

Many children reported the effects of hunger on their mental health, saying they felt frustrated, aggressive, and unable to concentrate, which impacted their ability to learn at school, socialize with friends and communicate with their family, sometimes becoming violent.

- *"Right now I am homeless and have no clothes because my parents wanted me to be married to a man I don't know while I am still young so I refuse and ran away, right now I stay in other people's houses. Sometimes they deny me food and sometimes they give me food so my feeding is not stable" said a 12-year-old girl.*

## FARIDAH'S TESTIMONY

Faridah is a young woman refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who now lives in Sweden. At the age of eight, she lost her mother to conflict and was separated from her brother.

- *"As a child I was forced to leave my sweet home, my house, my friends, and my schooling. We had a tradition to cook a special dish every Sunday with my mother and I have a lot of memories of that time before I lost her."*

Later, she endured neglect, sexual violence, and marriage at the age of thirteen while she lived with her uncle's family. At seventeen, after being further displaced by conflict, she arrived at Kyaka camp in Uganda and started to rebuild her life:

- *"I fled to safety in the middle of the night with my son in my arms and a small bag of belongings."*

Faridah worked to help girls in the community feel empowered and supported through music, dance, drama, learning, and livelihood activities. She shared these experiences with the event, and explained why COVID-19 is particularly damaging for refugee communities:

- *"Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of us are more vulnerable. But refugees are facing many compounding challenges, such as struggling with documentation, limited access to verified and timely information, reduction of refugee support, like food and cash assistance, loss of jobs, and school closures for children. All of these challenges have rendered many refugees hopeless and contributed to increases in gender-based violence, child or forced marriages, sexual exploitation, and psychosocial stress."*

Finally, Faridah offered three lessons that the international community must learn:

- **"First,** refugees can do things to empower themselves. Yes! We are refugees, we ran to save our lives, but we have turned the page, and we keep on trying to integrate ourselves in our new countries. We are working to participate and contribute in the

good times and the bad times. I have learned that COVID-19 doesn't pick who to infect. It's very important to work together whether a refugee or a host national.”

- **“Second**, Often, and especially during conflict, children cannot defend their rights or express how they feel. They are not consulted. No one ever asks their opinions. But children’s rights are not suspended during conflict. In times of emergency, it is more important than ever to consider and protect children's rights.”
- **“Third**, local refugee youth led organisations are doing amazing child protection work. Refugee youth understand their communities. They are role models who have themselves survived child protection difficulties. Young refugees are using their experience to speak and act in a powerful way to reach out to those who really need help their communities. This is the best way to support child protection at the community level. Young refugee leaders' work is effective and should be recognized and supported.”

## THE MAIN IMPACTS OF COVID-19 AND CONFLICT ON CHILDREN

### Child recruitment

More children have been pushed into joining armed forces and armed groups due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, while few among those released by armed forces and groups are able to access reintegration programmes or support.

- The reintegration support for children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups is significantly delayed for large numbers of children recently separated, as agencies had to halt existing or were unable to set up new reintegration projects due to the challenges posed by the pandemic.
- Former child soldiers need support to be reintegrated into a peaceful way of life. Cycles of violence can only end when they are provided access to healthcare, mental health support, and education.

### COVID-19 restrictions

Measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus have resulted in constraints to physically access areas, as well as survivors or witnesses of violations. The closure of borders, reductions in humanitarian space, and suspension of services all disproportionately impacted children.

- The closure of schools, reduced field presence of protection and humanitarian actors, as well as the reduction in family income due to COVID-19 restrictions are all factors that have exposed children to grave violations, with specific and different negative outcomes for girls and for boys.
- The negative impact of COVID-19 pushed many of displaced families to adopt negative coping mechanisms, including child marriage and children joining armed groups. The measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have hit the forcibly displaced population particularly hard. This group often has limited access to the labour market and are dependent on humanitarian assistance. Increased poverty is pushing displaced families to adopt extremely harmful coping mechanisms such as child marriage, children’s recruitment into armed groups and child labour including the worst forms.

### Displacement

The vast majority of displaced persons are women and children. They face significantly higher risks to abuse, denial of basic rights, sexual assault, and abduction. Displaced persons are also likely to suffer significantly higher mortality rates and often are deprived of shelter, education, and protection services.

- Conflict is one of the key causes of forced displacement with around 1 in 80 of the world’s children estimated to be living in forced displacement. Conflict drives displacement and puts millions of children’s health and wellbeing at risk. Over 40% of all refugees under UNHCR’s mandate are children. In many settings, families flee conflict zones because of the risks that children face including sexual violence, recruitment, lack of health or education services, poverty and violence.

## Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Children are exposed to unprecedented rates of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect, particularly those trapped in conflict or those facing the medical, social, economic and psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Severe and prolonged stress can have serious long-term consequences, including disrupting children's development and learning and increasing the risk of physical health problems in adulthood.

- Prolonged conflict, mass displacement, intensifying natural disasters, and climate change will all increase the need for mental health support.
- Mental health and psychological needs were already too great for too many children and their caregivers. For example, one in four children lives with a parent with mental health needs, and tragically, suicide is the number three cause of death for adolescents worldwide.
- Children – especially children living through conflict and crisis – often lack access to mental health and psychosocial support, with potentially devastating long-term effects.
- Mental health is an issue of equity. Children and adolescents exposed to poverty, violence, neglect, and humanitarian crises are at the highest risk of mental health concerns. This means more and better mental health and psychosocial support services are needed across all sectors and community services, as well as strengthening systems and workforces to meet these complex challenges.

## Protection

Children are at risk of violence including physical and emotional abuse, sexual harm and exploitation, and neglect or deliberate deprivation. Children living in households and communities impacted by conflict, natural disasters, and global pandemics are at particular risk of having their learning, relationship building, and their ability to thrive as an adult negatively impacted.

- Child protection and reintegration services have suffered immensely from the pandemic. Schools need to reopen quickly and safely. Engagement with parties to conflict through action plans and dialogue must be intensified with a view to ending and preventing violations against children. In doing so, specific attention must be paid to vulnerable groups of children, such as girls, children with disabilities and refugee and internally displaced children.
- The international community's response to child protection should make increasing importance use of digital technologies.
- Child protection should be a key component of COVID-19 recovery plans.

## Sexual violence

Sexual violence is often used as a weapon of war against children and other civilians to terrorize them, spread fear and intimidation for political and military gain, to ethnically cleanse or humiliate an ethnic group, or to punish civilians for suspected support of opposing forces. Survivors face several challenges, which are compounded in conflicts. These include a lack of systems and processes to report the crime, stigma, fear of retaliation, and a lack of support and services. The trauma that sexual violence inflicts can have long-lasting physical, psychological, social, and economic effects. The brutality of the physical act itself can be especially damaging for children whose bodies are not yet fully developed.

- Rape and other forms of sexual violence remains the most underreported grave violation and disproportionately affects girls. In addition, the reduction in family income have led to an increase in child marriage, mostly affecting girls.
- In some areas, increasing attacks on schools and abduction of children from schools and along school routes exacerbated the vulnerability of girls, since girls are usually the first to drop out of school and find it more difficult to return to school, denying them their right to education.

## School closures

COVID-19 and conflict have led to school closures which affect 600 million children across the world. For many children, there is a real risk that they will not return to school. It is essential for children's learning, protection, and future life chances that education facilities are reopened and built back stronger and more resilient

- Schools protect children from the physical dangers around them such as child recruitment or child marriage. It is well-documented that children in school are better protected against violence and abuse. Preventing attacks and military use of schools is key to ensuring safe access to education.
- Education systems in many parts of the world were already in crisis before COVID-19 because of the effects of armed conflict, the climate emergency, and economic inequalities. The global pandemic has made these challenges exponentially worse with unequal access to COVID-19 vaccines and digital connectivity widening even further the schooling gap

- between children. A child's right to education does not end in times of emergency – in fact it is more critical than ever.
- In schools, children receive lifesaving aid such as food and water, and crucial psychosocial support. The foundations of many education systems around the world have proven fragile to shocks. It is imperative that the international community does not limit its ambition to building 'back' to how things were pre-pandemic, but to build back better and differently.
  - Many children have been forced to abandon their village because their school was no longer there. The pandemic has made conditions even more challenging for children forced to drop out of school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants offered a broad consensus on the need to better protect children in conflict, ensure no child is left behind in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and, ultimately, build back stronger through collective efforts. Recommendations shared by participants included:

### Accountability

- Strengthen accountability mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable for grave child rights violations and prevent future violations.
- Ensure parties respect their obligation to protect children and educational facilities in conflict.

### Anticipatory and pre-emptive action

- Invest in early warning mechanisms and preventive actions to better protect children. Develop new and creative preparedness measures to prevent violations from happening in similar situations in the future, including through the development of prevention plans and through capacity-building of local actors to identify and report grave violations to the relevant child protection focal points in a manner more conducive to their immediate protection in times of crisis.
- Ensure every country, including those affected by armed conflict, have a preparedness plan on education to respond to future crises. This will require urgently filling the education financing gap and adjusting financing modalities to enable anticipatory action. Change the way we do business, acting early based on forecasted or real-time data to mitigate the impact on education systems before a crisis takes place.

### Coordination

- Establish new partnerships among international, regional, sub-regional and local actors, including the donor community, to develop a more coordinated approach to prevention measures and reintegration services.

### Data

- Provide political and financial support for an effective UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM). This includes greater investment on analysis of MRM data, not only to be able to assess the overall impact of the pandemic on children affected by armed conflict but also to find new ways to address similar situations in the future, as well as emerging new challenges.
- Invest in opportunities offered by new technologies to improve MRMs while being aware of inequalities of access to information communication tools across the world. There is a need for enhanced data analysis of the gender dimensions of grave violations and to ensure that service and assistance programmes for children take these gender dimensions into account.

### Detention

- Ensure all forcibly displaced children and their families can seek safety and protection, including accessing freedom of movement within their countries and right to asylum.
- Address the persisting stigmas attached to children and parents detained in facilities.

## Funding

- Focus on long-term actions for the protection of conflict-affected children, by prioritizing flexible and multi-year funding and the development of tailored child programs with the aim to provide a holistic approach to child protection prevention and response initiatives.
- Funds should not be diverted from essential child protection and Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) activities to support COVID-19 prevention and response interventions, but rather ensure that child protection is mainstreamed in preparedness and response plans and emergency funding proposals.
- Mobilize resources to ensure provision of cash assistance, livelihoods and social security, child protection, mental health, and education services to support families and children affected by conflict.
- Fund and embed dedicated child protection capacity in UN missions. Ensure that in all mandates, resources and staffing, the UN and its Member States prioritize UN operations are fit for purpose, including with regards to child protection.

## Gender

- Ensure more gender-sensitive approaches and responses to children affected by armed conflict, which requires a full understanding of the risks and vulnerabilities to grave violations and other abuses of girls, and the ways in which these may differ from those experienced by boys.

## Inclusivity

- Focus on equity and child participation, aiming to reach most vulnerable children first and prioritise including their voices in our interventions.
- Strengthen local civil society organisations.

## Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

- Prioritize MHPSS provision, paying specific attention to vulnerable groups of children, such as girls, children with disabilities and refugee and internally displaced children.
- Integrate psychological care in health centers and set up free spaces dedicated to child protection to overcome this lack in traditional health centers.

## International policy

- Ensure greater efforts are made in the implementation of Security Council resolution 2427.
- Endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration at the upcoming Fourth International Conference on Safe Schools hosted by the government of Nigeria.
- Support efforts by Niger and Norway on a UN Security Council resolution on the protection of education in conflict – Council members should agree on a strong text and ensure its implementation.
- Endorse the Paris Principles, the Vancouver Principles and to ratify the Option Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.



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Children