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# A Second Revolution

## Thirty years of child rights, and the unfinished agenda

CHILD RIGHTS NOW!

ChildFund Alliance   PLAN INTERNATIONAL   Save the Children   SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL   Terre des Hommes International Federation   World Vision

# Acknowledgements

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# Abbreviations

**AIDS**  Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
**ASEAN**  Association of South-East Asian Nations
**CRC**  UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
**DHS**  Demographic and Health Survey
**FGM**  Female Genital Mutilation
**HIV**  Human Immunodeficiency Virus
**ID**  Identification
**ILO**  International Labour Organisation
**LGBTQI**  Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex
**MDGs**  Millennium Development Goals
**MRM**  Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism
**NGO**  Non-Governmental Organisation
**OECD**  Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
**SAARC**  South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
**SDGs**  Sustainable Development Goals
**UN**  United Nations
**UNFCC**  United Nations Framework Convention on Climate
**UNICEF**  United Nations Children's Fund

# Foreword

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted 30 years ago, has contributed to a transformation of historic proportions. On most measures, the lives of children today are on average dramatically better than 30 years ago. Hundreds of millions more children are being vaccinated, eating healthily, living safely and going to school. Laws and policies recognise the rights of children as never before.

But this is no time to celebrate. In slums, conflict zones, migrant centres and remote villages there are millions of children whose lives have not improved. They are hungry, sick and left uneducated. Many of them are subjected to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Often this is the result of discrimination, on the basis of race, caste, religion, gender identity (especially towards girls), or sexual orientation, or because they have a disability. These are the children who have been left behind. Their situation is a grave breach of the promises made to children in 1989.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified treaty in history. The Sustainable Development Goals have been agreed by all governments. They go hand in hand. We cannot achieve the SDGs without realising the rights of all children, nor vice-versa.

This report calls on states to fulfil their commitments with renewed vigour, urgency and imagination, so all children can grow up healthy, educated, safe from violence and free to make choices over their lives.

But this task cannot be achieved by states alone. As the world's six largest child-focused international NGOs, we believe that we have an important contribution to make.

We commit to working with others to develop practical solutions that secure children's rights, and uphold the principles of the CRC. We will strive to improve our own accountability to children, and support children to influence the decisions that shape their lives. And we will work with others to monitor progress and defend children's rights.

Let's act in the best interests of all children. It's time to deliver.

**Anne-Birgitte Albrectsen,** *Plan International*
**Meg Gardinier,** *ChildFund Alliance*
**Norbert Meder,** *SOS Children's Villages International*
**Delphine Moralis,** *Terre des Hommes International Federation*
**Andrew Morley,** *World Vision International*
**Helle Thorning-Schmidt,** *Save the Children International*


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# Introduction
# **A second revolution**

In November 1989, just weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and only months before the release of Nelson Mandela from a South African jail, another seismic change took place in the international order. Although it wasn't widely recognised at the time, the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child signalled a revolution.

For the first time, states around the world recognised in an international treaty that children have rights, equal to those of adults, and that the strength of societies is tied inextricably to the flourishing of their children. Historically, children had often been considered half-persons: either adjuncts to their parents, or voiceless subjects of pity and charity. Now, children were acknowledged as people with their own rights, voice and agency.

The UN CRC went on to become the most ratified United Nations Human Rights Convention, supported by 196 countries. It heralded a fundamental shift in how children and childhood are perceived. But its impact has reached far beyond changes in perception. It also contributed to historically unprecedented gains that transformed the lives of hundreds of millions of people: children today are healthier, better nourished, more educated, and more protected in law than at any point in human history.

Views differ on the extent to which the CRC catalysed these changes. Its adoption coincided with a period of dramatic social, economic and technological change: as the Cold War ended, millions of people were integrated into the global economy, many long-standing conflicts came to an end, and a wave of democratic elections transformed the global political landscape. These broader geopolitical and economic shifts helped to drive dramatic improvements in wellbeing, and reductions in extreme poverty.

Yet the convention's impact should not be underplayed. First, the CRC spurred the passage of a raft of new laws and policies that helped to give children more formal protection, and increased their visibility within governments. Recognition of a right is not the same thing as realisation, but there's substantial evidence of changes in law contributing to marked improvements in areas where children are especially vulnerable, including labour exploitation, corporal punishment, alternative care, and forced and early marriage.

Secondly, it provided a framework in which more effective and responsive states increased their investment in essential services, boosting health and education outcomes. Better monitoring and gathering of data has helped governments to track progress. Meanwhile strengthened civil society has played a growing part in holding governments accountable for progress, in modelling effective service delivery, and in raising people's expectations of what is due to them.

Thirdly, the CRC has helped to bring about a world in which children themselves are increasingly shaping their own futures. Most fundamentally, it recognised that children have civil and political rights, including the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, and to peaceful assembly and association. Accelerating urbanisation, the spread of the internet and mobile phones, and a rapid

expansion of secondary education have all made it easier for children to get access to information, communicate, and mobilise. But the CRC has also led many governments to give formal legal recognition to children's voices, fostering a wider culture of children's civic participation, often starting in schools and in organisations for children and youth.

These changes are remarkable, yet too often they go unremarked. For example, the mortality rate for children under the age of five has more than halved in the last 30 years, with the rate of reduction doubling since 2000.[1] This is equivalent to 17,000 fewer child deaths every day.[2] In the case of education, the picture is similar. Whereas 120 million children were missing a primary education in 1989, by 2017 this had fallen to less than 64 million.[3]

What's more remarkable still is that gains such as this have been achieved during a period of rapid population growth, most of it concentrated in poorer countries. In 1989, there were 1.7 billion children aged 14 and under in the world. By 2018, that had risen to 1.95 billion.[4]

Yet for all these advances, there remains an enormous unfinished agenda. For many millions of children, rights are honoured more in the breach than the observance. Each year, over 5 million children still die from preventable causes.[5] On one measure, over 60% of children at primary school in developing countries fail to meet minimum proficiency in learning.[6] 815 million people experience hunger, and 150 million young children have their long-term physical and mental development stunted by chronic malnutrition.[7] Countless children, both in richer and poorer countries, face a daily reality of poverty, exploitation, violence, neglect and abuse.

The challenge of realising the rights laid out in the CRC has at least two dimensions. One

involves finishing the job in areas like child mortality and basic education, where advances have been made, but where some groups of children have been left behind. Increasingly, the children who still face a significant risk of early death and hunger, or lack an education, are those living in poorly governed or conflict-affected contexts, or those belonging to excluded social groups. Many governments find it politically convenient to ignore these groups of children, while a lack of resources and conditions on the ground often make it difficult to improve their situation, even where the will exists.

The second challenge involves rights in areas where progress has been less steady, and where many governments have yet to translate the CRC's vision into either policy or practice. This is especially true in areas related to children's protection from violence, and children's civil and political rights: yet arguably these were areas where the Convention most clearly expanded our understanding of child rights.

Of course, these two challenges are closely connected. Children who are denied the right to health care or education because of social and political barriers – often tied to gender, ethnicity, or disability – are more likely to secure those rights if their political voice is strengthened, and active discrimination is tackled.

Without a stronger rights-based approach to children's wellbeing and development, the UN Sustainable Development Goals – with their twin objectives of ending poverty by 2030 and protecting the planet – will be difficult, if not impossible to achieve. The connection between the CRC and the Goals is a close one: many of the SDG targets are directly related to the Convention. Many more address issues, from climate change and inequality to good governance, that are critical enablers of the

promises to children set out in the CRC. The UN's own recent assessment of the SDGs shows that many of these promises are being broken, with implementation in most areas being off-track, or in areas such as hunger, stalling altogether.

In the UN Secretary-General's own words, the SDGs must be injected with a greater sense of urgency. The cost of inaction will be especially high for a generation of children at a point in history when the world's total number of children is peaking, and when the distribution of children between regions is shifting, with a growing share living in Africa. If the right actions are taken in the next decade, the effects could be transformational: investing now in children's rights represents one of development's 'best buys', with the potential to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty,

and lay the foundations for a fairer, more prosperous, and sustainable future.

If this opportunity is lost, the costs are likely to be enormous. Today's children are tomorrow's adults. Failure will be counted not only in terms of wasted human potential and preventable suffering, but also in terms of social instability, foregone economic growth, and political volatility. In a rapidly changing world, realising the rights of children is a smart investment, as well as a legal obligation. Thirty years ago, governments sparked a revolution in how the world views and treats its children. Yet the promise of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was only ever partially realised. What is needed now is a second revolution, in which the rights of every child – whoever they are, and wherever they live – are fulfilled.


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# 1 Change for children

From any perspective, the last thirty years have witnessed extraordinary improvements in the lives of children. Yet too often, this basic truth is obscured by a narrative that emphasises failed development efforts. The UN Millennium Development Goals, with a target date of 2015 set against a baseline of 1990, may have been missed in the aggregate. But in many cases failure disguises historically unprecedented gains. Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world, is a case in point. In 1989, 1 in 5 children in the country died before their fifth birthday. By 2017, that rate had reduced to roughly 1 in 12. Burkina Faso missed the MDG target of a two-thirds reduction in child mortality. But it had reduced child mortality by 60%, a rate 1.5 times faster than what was achieved in the thirty years before the CRC was adopted.[8]

## 1.1 Survival and education

The experience of Burkina Faso has been repeated across every region since 1989, with global child mortality falling from 93 for every 1,000 live births, to 39 today: an absolute reduction in the annual toll of child deaths from 12.7 million to 5.4 million.[9] Since 2000, it's estimated that 30 million young lives have been saved as a result.[10] The longer-term

picture is one of convergence between richer and poorer countries. In the early 1900s, only six countries had infant mortality rates below 10%. Today, no country has an infant mortality rate above that level.[11] Despite low economic growth and the impact of AIDS, since 1960 Africa, the world's poorest region, has seen absolute and percentage improvements in under-five survival that outstrip those in high-income countries.[12]

Much of the progress made after 1989 was influenced by a series of UN summits in the 1990s that began to translate the rights enshrined in the CRC into time-bound targets. At the 1990 World Summit for Children, leaders of 71 governments joined UNICEF and the World Health Organisation in a grand alliance that set targets to cut child deaths and advance children's rights. Countries drafted new National Plans of Action for children, and increased investment in public health programmes such as vaccination against polio and measles, community management of diarrhoea, and malaria control.

Improvements in nutrition have been a critical enabler of better child survival rates. Stunting resulting from chronic malnutrition has almost halved since 1989, from about 40% to around

Figure 1: **Child mortality has fallen dramatically**

Child mortality rates (per 1,000 live births)
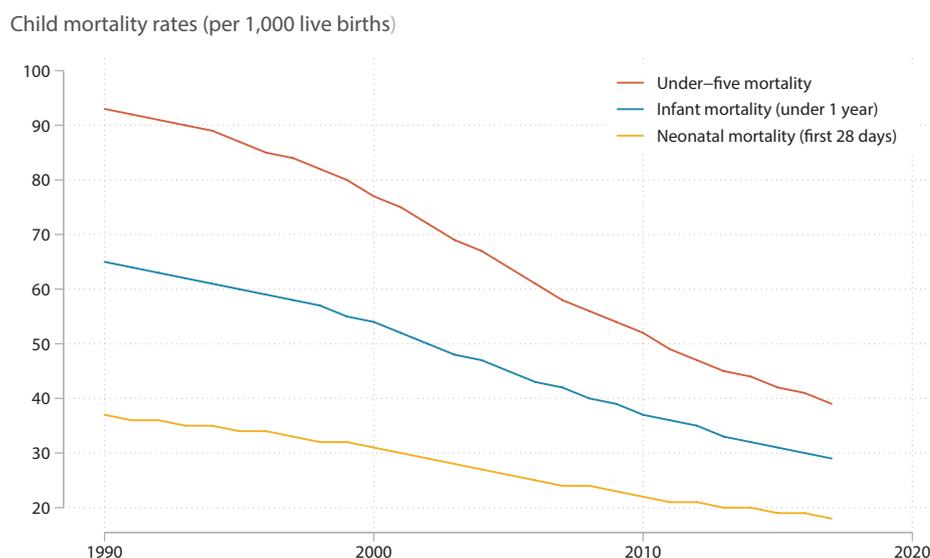


Data: **UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation/World Bank**

22% today. Better water and sanitation have also made a major contribution: some 91% of the world's population had piped drinking water by 2015, compared to 76% in 1990 – an increase of nearly 2 billion people.[13]

But probably the most important factor has been a child survival network that began in the 1980s and subsequently expanded. This network, encompassing frontline health workers, governments, international institutions and NGOs, worked closely with communities – and especially with mothers – to ensure that infants are immunised, dehydration is treated, bednets are distributed and children are properly fed. And as child mortality rates fell, families and communities got used to the idea that children could survive and should thrive, bringing with it the confidence to plan for smaller families. The average number of children born to each woman has continued to fall, accelerating a trend that began in the 1950s, with fertility rates falling since 1989 by 28% for Least Developed Countries, and by 45% in South Asia.[14]

A similar story can be told in education. The World Conference on Education for All in 1990, at Jomtien in Thailand, reinforced the idea that learning was a right, and led to the adoption of targets, including universal access to, and completion of primary education by 2000. That target was missed, but it helped to spur dramatic improvements in enrolment, completion and learning, and paved the way for the Millennium Development Goal targets of universal primary completion by 2015, and gender equality in enrolment by 2005.

The Jomtien conference led many countries to adopt an official policy of Universal Primary Education, and many governments to make primary education free, by abolishing official charges. Even if the implementation of these policies was often flawed, and not accompanied by sufficient public investment, it led a surge in enrolments as tens of millions of poor children went to school for the first time.

Globally, net enrolment rates for primary education have risen from 82% to 90% since the adoption of the CRC. In Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country, 70% of primary aged children were out of school in 1989. By 2015, that had fallen dramatically, to 15%.[15] Literacy rates for older girls and young women, aged 15-24, rose in Least Developed Countries over the same period from 47% to 73% – approaching four times the global rate of improvement.[16]

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the worst-performing region, rates of school-age children in school jumped from 52% in 1990 to 80% by 2015.[17] And as global enrolment neared 90%, the numbers of primary-age children missing out on school globally fell, from 120 million in 1990 to around 64 million today.[18]

The 2005 MDG target of eliminating the gap between girls and boys in education, and reaching equality at primary and secondary levels, was met globally in 2014, even if wide variations persist within and between countries.

The fruits of these massive efforts to meet the rights of all children to basic education are seen in the improvement of youth literacy rates from 83% in 1989 to 91% in 2016, with girls' literacy rising faster than that of boys, and reducing, if not closing, the gender gap.

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# BOX 1: **CHILD RIGHTS AND THE MILLENNIUM DECLARATION**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child laid the foundations for a series of global targets, adopted at UN summits in the 1990s, that led to the adoption of the Millennium Declaration. Many of the commitments at the turn of the century drew directly on the principles of the CRC, and reinforced efforts to realise children's rights:

*… in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.*

*We will spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for all internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development.*

*We will spare no effort to ensure that children and all civilian populations that suffer disproportionately the consequences of natural disasters, genocide, armed conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies are given every assistance and protection so that they can resume normal life as soon as possible.*

*We resolve… to encourage the ratification and full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.*

The Millennium Declaration was reflected in the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While the MDGs responded to many of the provisions of the Convention, they neglected children's protection and participation. The focus of the Declaration on equality and the most vulnerable children was diluted in a drive for measurable improvements at the global level. Despite the shortcomings of the MDGs, in many areas including child mortality, progress towards the goals accelerated after 2005.

Figure 2: **The gender gap for primary school enrolment has closed**

Gender parity index for primary school enrolment (gross)



Data: **UNESCO/World Bank**
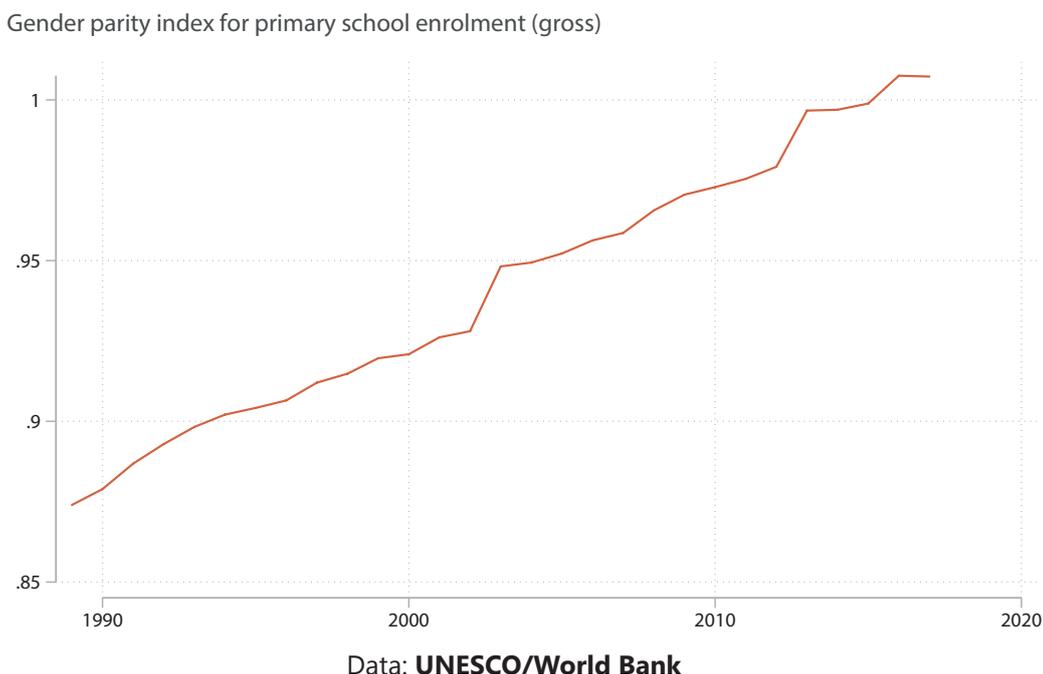
## 1.2 Child rights in national and international law

These remarkable improvements in children's wellbeing were driven, at least in part, by a compelling idea, that children have rights. Children's rights were first articulated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, drafted by Eglantyne Jebb in 1924 and adopted by the League of Nations. Eglantyne Jebb's pioneering vision laid the foundations for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, over half a century later. But it was only after governments ratified the CRC that formal recognition was given to this vision of children as people in their own right, to whom adults and states have binding obligations (see box 2).

The CRC triggered a deep change – albeit one that is incomplete – in how children are viewed and treated by adults. Most obviously, this has been reflected in a raft of new legal protections and policies. Many countries have passed Children's Acts into law, and adopted national strategies for children. In turn, this has shaped public conversations about how children are treated, and should be treated.

At the global level, new tools and procedures have been established to monitor and report on children's rights, including the periodic reports by governments to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee responds with recommendations, and has issued a large number of advisory, in-depth 'general comments' on matters affecting child rights. This has helped to make child rights more visible, and given civil society organisations tools with which to hold governments more accountable for delivery of their commitments.

Civil society groups and children themselves, often collaborating in child rights networks, have organized alternative shadow reports that complement the formal reports submitted by governments to the UN, and often provide a critical commentary on governments' self-assessments. Other UN Conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, are helping to buttress the commitments in the CRC. Meanwhile, the work of the UN Human Rights Council has opened new spaces in which to track implementation of commitments to children.

## BOX 2: **THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD – ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE**

The **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (CRC) mobilised states around a vision of the world where children are seen as holders of their own rights, and valued as 'beings', even if they are also 'becomings' who are developing, with their situation as children having an impact on their future ability to secure rights in adulthood.[19] It gives children a voice and the right to speak about issues that concern them and affect them.

Children – defined as any person under the age of 18 – were identified as subjects and holders of rights, and given legal grounds to be active citizens. The agency of children is at the core of the CRC, allowing them to defend their rights and the rights of others, and to thrive in way that builds societies grounded in the principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination.

Thanks to the Convention, children as individuals are equal before the law, and State Parties and other duty bearers have an obligation to fulfil and uphold their rights. The realisation of these rights is a common responsibility shared by all 196 countries that have ratified the Convention[20] – with states expected to mobilise resources to the maximum available extent to deliver on this commitment.

The CRC is both the most widely ratified human rights convention in the world, and the most comprehensive binding instrument, covering political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights. These are set out in 54 articles that cover three broad areas:

- **survival and development**, which include the right to food, shelter, education, health, leisure and culture, family relations and parental guidance and care.

- **protection** from violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

- **participation**, which covers issues related to civil rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, thought, conscience, religion, association, and peaceful assembly, as well as the right to information and the right of children to participate in decisions that affect them.

The Convention defines **4 core principles** that must be applied to all rights throughout childhood, in order for the CRC's promise to be realised: non-discrimination (article 2); the best interests of the child as a primary concern (article 3); the right to life, survival and development (article 6); and the right to freely express views and be heard (article 12).

In 2003 the Committee on the Rights of the Child also set out the 'general measures of implementation' that states need to put in place to realise child rights, including harmonization of laws and policies with the CRC, allocation of public resources to the maximum extent possible, and mechanisms to coordinate implementation, collect data and raise awareness of child rights.[21]

Since 1989, three additional binding legal instruments have been adopted, resulting in a more comprehensive legal protection for children. These 'optional protocols' to the CRC focus on children in armed conflict; the sale of children, child prostitution and pornography; and a communications procedure that allows complaints to be lodged against alleged child rights violations. This allows a child not only to make claims directly to the Committee, where a national legal system has failed to address a violation, but also allows that child to receive remedies for rights that were denied to them.

As with other human rights treaties, a group of experts – The Committee on the Rights of the Child – oversees implementation. The Committee is hosted by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

laws, has been informed by a growing body of knowledge about children's lives. There's increasing understanding of how children's brains and bodies develop, how they learn, and of what kinds of parenting practices and interventions will help them to thrive and stay safe. The critical importance of the early years, and of transitions in childhood, are much better understood than was the case 30 years ago. Data, from a massive expansion of household level surveys, as well as from census, health and education systems, are being collected and used as never before, even if major gaps remain. These changes have perhaps been most critically important in relation to violence, and its impact on children, which is receiving far more attention from policy makers than in the past, and is the subject of increasingly concerted advocacy from civil society organisations.

## 1.3 Progress in tackling violence and exploitation

Violence against children exists in every society and context, both within and outside the family. It knows very few geographical, cultural, social or economic boundaries. But how children experience violence, and the prevalence and kinds of violence they experience is shaped by attitudes and entrenched beliefs related to gender, childhood, race, disability, sexuality, and cultural tradition.

Understanding these attitudes and beliefs, and their impact on how adults and children behave, is critical to tackling the problem. But changes in law and policy also matter, and can either reinforce or challenge behaviour that harms children. Since 1989 there have been growing efforts to strengthen legal protections for children, and tackle some of the most dramatic failures to safeguard children from violence.

Corporal punishment is one example of how the CRC has been a catalyst for change. Prior to 1989, only three countries had laws prohibiting all corporal punishment of children. Today, over 50 do – often the result of concerted campaigning by civil society (see box 3).[22]

Beyond the United Nations, since 1989 regional bodies have played an increasingly important role in promoting and monitoring national commitments to child rights. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child was adopted by the Organisation of African Unity in 1990, and entered into force in 1999. So far, it has been ratified by 47 of the 55 African Union member states. The African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, hosted by the African Union Commission, was established in 2001, and is responsible for monitoring implementation of the Charter, and regularly reports on progress to African governments. Regional child rights monitoring mechanisms have also been established by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the European Union, ASEAN in South East Asia and SAARC in South Asia.

> **"Listen to us… there are many people who think that your opinion will be ridiculous or that it doesn't make sense… even if it's good, because you're a child"**
>
> Lucia*, Spain

This major increase in the attention given to child rights in the international system, and in national

## BOX 3: **BANNING CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN MONGOLIA**

In 2016, Mongolia became the 49th country in the world to ban all corporal punishment of children. Two new laws – on Child Protection and on Children's Rights – prohibited the use of physical punishment by parents, confirmed children's right to protection, and obliged care-givers and teachers to use non-violent discipline. The reforms were part of a wider effort to create an improved, rights-based national child protection system.

This change can be traced back to 2007, when an advocacy campaign involving 25 national and international civil society organisations began to engage children, parents, teachers, lawyers, and journalists. The campaign raised public awareness, generated evidence of the impact of corporal punishment, and lobbied for legislative change.

Children played an important role in the process, countering opposing arguments and bringing the human impact of corporal punishment to life. A regional participatory research project on corporal punishment, part of the UN Study on Violence against Children, had a major influence on debates.  Children were involved in the study, and provided feedback to two shadow reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, where they called for a separate law on child protection.

Since 2016, civil society organisations have continued to engage government on implementation, working to improve the legal framework, and to change social attitudes. This work includes training programmes to promote positive discipline amongst civil servants, social workers, teachers and parents.

Similarly dramatic changes can be seen in the raising of the minimum legal age of marriage. In the past 6 years, 15 countries have increased the legal age of marriage to 18 years or removed exemptions that allowed younger girls to marry – progress that far exceeds what took place over the previous 15 years.

Changes in the law do not automatically reduce the incidence of child marriage – partly because of weak enforcement, and also because poverty is often a driving factor.[23]

Globally, girls from the poorest 20% of households face a 76% higher-than-average risk of child marriage, and humanitarian crises and economic collapse often precipitate an increase in the number of girls being married off by their families.[24] But it is nonetheless likely that changes in the minimum age have contributed to a climate in which girls are less likely to become brides: UNICEF data show a 15% fall over the last decade in the number of young women who were married as children, from 1 in 4, to 1 in 5.[25]

Figure 3: **Child marriage is falling, but rates are much higher for the poorest girls**

Child marriage (% women 20-24 years first married or in union by age 18)
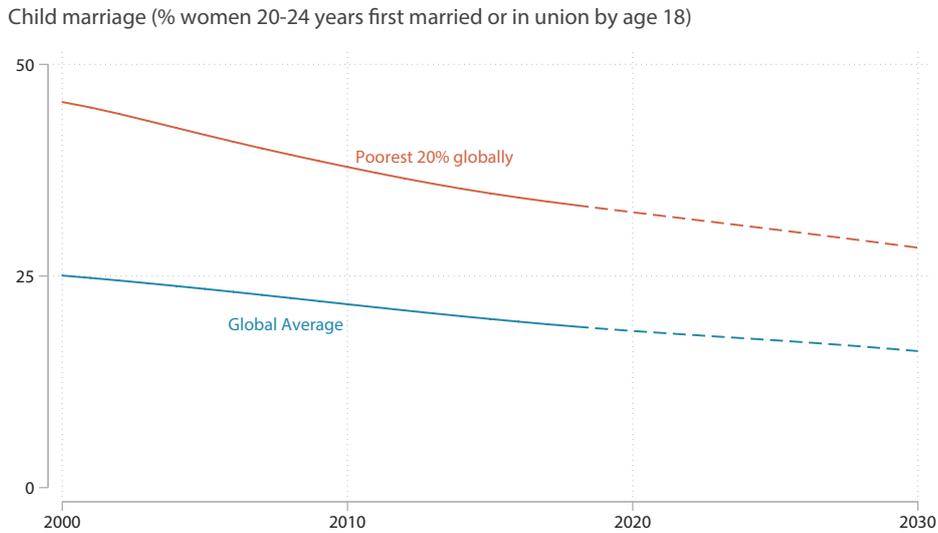


Data: **Save the Children calculations based on Save the Children/World Bank estimates, and DHS/MICS Dotted lines indicate projections**

In many countries, especially in parts of Africa and the Middle East, child marriage is closely associated with Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), rooted in the belief that cutting helps to preserve a girl's cleanliness and chastity, and therefore her ability to be married. Yet one recent study reported that the prevalence in East Africa amongst girls aged 14 and under has fallen from over 70% in 1995, to 8% in 2016.[26] Large reductions over the same period were also reported in West Africa and North Africa. Even if some of these girls undergo genital mutilation at a later age, it is undoubtedly the case that girls and young women in these regions are now far less likely to have undergone FGM than their mothers' generation. Legal reform has played a part in this progress, but the more important factor has been the engagement of influential community and religious leaders, an understanding of local context, and public education about the risks to women's health associated with FGM.

This picture of significant but incomplete progress is seen in other areas where children are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and neglect. From 2000 to 2016 the estimated number of children engaged in child labour – defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, and is mentally, physical, socially

or morally harmful – fell by 94 million, while the number of children in hazardous work fell by more than half over the same period. The adoption of the Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour in 1999, and its subsequent ratification by 184 member states – the most widely ratified ILO convention in history – was an important catalyst for legislative and policy change. However, since 2012 progress has slowed, and according to the ILO at the current rate of decline 52 million children will still be engaged in hazardous work in 2025.[27]

The international community has also instituted important legal and normative changes in relation to children in armed conflict. Conflict accounts for some of the worst forms of violence against children, including killing and maiming, forced recruitment into armed groups, and sexual violence. It also tends to create environments in which normal standards of behaviour are weakened, and impunity flourishes. The CRC has been strengthened by the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children, established through Security Council Resolution 1612, in 2005. The MRM informs an annual listing by the UN Secretary-General of countries and armed groups responsible for grave violations. Offending parties are asked to draw up action

plans to comply with international law: to date, 28 listed parties have signed action plans, including 11 Government forces and 17 non-State armed groups.

Ultimately, the impact of initiatives such as the MRM is often blunted by political considerations, and by decisions taken in the UN Security Council. The 2016 report, for example, removed the Saudi-led coalition from the listing over its role in Yemen, after Saudi Arabia mobilised its allies.[28] Yet in some key areas the UN mechanisms for children affected by armed conflict have had a significant impact. Although the use of child soldiers in armed conflict has risen in the last 20 years, between 2015 and 2018 over 17,000 children were formally released from armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and globally over 55,000 children have been released since 2013.[29]

In all these cases – corporal punishment, child marriage, FGM, child labour and children in conflict – legal change has been complemented by better data, making it easier for governments and civil society to track progress and identify problems. Initiatives such as the UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children (1997), the UN Study on Violence Against Children (2006), and the appointments of UN Special Representatives for Children Affected by Armed Conflict, and on Violence Against Children have been important milestones, improving the understanding of how violence affects children in different contexts. Governments, the UN and civil society are now working together much more systematically to strengthen systems that prevent and respond to violence. New instruments such as the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action are also guiding better practices and safeguards for children in crises.

## 1.4 Children in vulnerable family settings

Growing up outside a family setting is one of the most powerful predictors of child deprivation and vulnerability. While abuse and neglect are most often experienced at the hands of parents and close relatives, children without parental care are at a heightened risk, and often suffer long-term emotional and physical effects. Roughly 150 million children around the world have lost one or both parents: in Sub-Saharan Africa, some 11 million children are affected due to HIV and AIDS.[30] Data from 77 countries suggest that 1 in 10 children are living with neither of their biological parents.[31] Most of these children live with relatives, but a significant number of them head their own households, or live with spouses or employers. These children are usually less able to exercise their rights, and often face both legal and social discrimination.



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## BOX 4: **DEINSTITUTIONALISING CARE IN ROMANIA**

When the Iron Curtain came down in 1990, Romania's orphanages came to international attention. At the time, 100,000 children were in institutional care, often living in in large, overcrowded public institutions that caused long-term physical and mental damage. In the past 28 years, Romania has made dramatic progress both in the standard of care given by the state to children, and in shifting away from institutions to more appropriate alternatives. In 2018, there were 6,600 children in institutional care, a 95% reduction since the end of the Ceausescu government.

Despite this progress, problems persist. Children continue to be abandoned and there is insufficient focus on reintegration of abandoned children, and on preventing separation, especially amongst high-risk groups such as adolescent mothers. Tackling the high levels of teenage and early pregnancies has a key role to play in tackling abandonment. Children from disadvantaged groups continue to be overrepresented in institutions. Children with disabilities account for almost 30% of the children in institutions,[32] and children from the minority Roma community are twice as likely to be institutionalised as non-Roma.[33]

Many children who've lost parents, or live on the streets, will spend at least some of their childhood living in institutional care. The data are patchy, since large numbers of children live in unregistered institutions. But the best available estimates are that 2.7 million children around the world currently live in residential care facilities.[34] There's less comprehensive global data for foster care, but it's estimated that 800,000 children in high-income countries are living in foster care (see box 4), and a further 790,000 in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.[35] For many of these children in alternative care settings there's a failure to meet basic standards of care and safety. In the worst cases, their rights are being systematically violated.

Despite the widespread belief that many children in formal alternative care are orphans, over 80% of them have one or both parents alive. In many cases better-designed and properly funded support services could have

prevented children from being separated in the first place, or allowed for reintegration into their families.

> *"What makes me happy… is having my brothers with me, this is what I enjoy most. And what makes me unhappy is that my parents don't visit me much"*
>
> Florin*, Romania

The situation of children in alternative care – and in institutional care especially – has been a major focus of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. In the past 30 years new international guidelines, including the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children in 2009, have promoted policies to prevent unnecessary separation from parents, to support the care of children away from institutions, and establish alternative care options that respond

to children's best interests. These include support for informal kinship care, by relatives or close friends; foster and family-based and family-like placements; residential care, such as emergency and transit care and small group homes; and supervised independent living arrangements for youth.

Implementation of such guidelines still has some way to go. In Africa, Asia and Latin America there is a concerning trend of increasing numbers of unregistered, privately run alternative care facilities, which lack any formal oversight, and often actively recruit children from their families.[36] For example, in Uganda there were 35 such facilities in the mid-1990s. Today, there are 800.[37]

Yet in the last ten years, inspired partly by UN Guidelines and the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, there have been increased efforts in many countries to develop quality standards and inspection mechanisms for alternative care settings. A growing emphasis has been put on children's rights and development, with individual case management informed by children's own views.

## 1.5 Children's participation and voice

The right to an identity is one of the cornerstones of the CRC, and a critical enabler of other rights. Since 1989, there has been a marked increase in birth registration of children under the age of five years, rising from 55% in 2000, to 78% in 2018. UNICEF and Plan International especially have played a key role in supporting increased birth registration: in the case of Ghana, a birth registration campaign in the early 2000's raised rates from 44% to 71% in just five years.[38]

Having their existence formally recognised in law is often a first step in children being able to make themselves heard. Children know their own situations best, and the quality of decision-making improves where they are able to influence decisions that impact on their lives.

Figure 4: **The number of children whose births are registered is rising**

Children under 5 whose births have been registered (%)
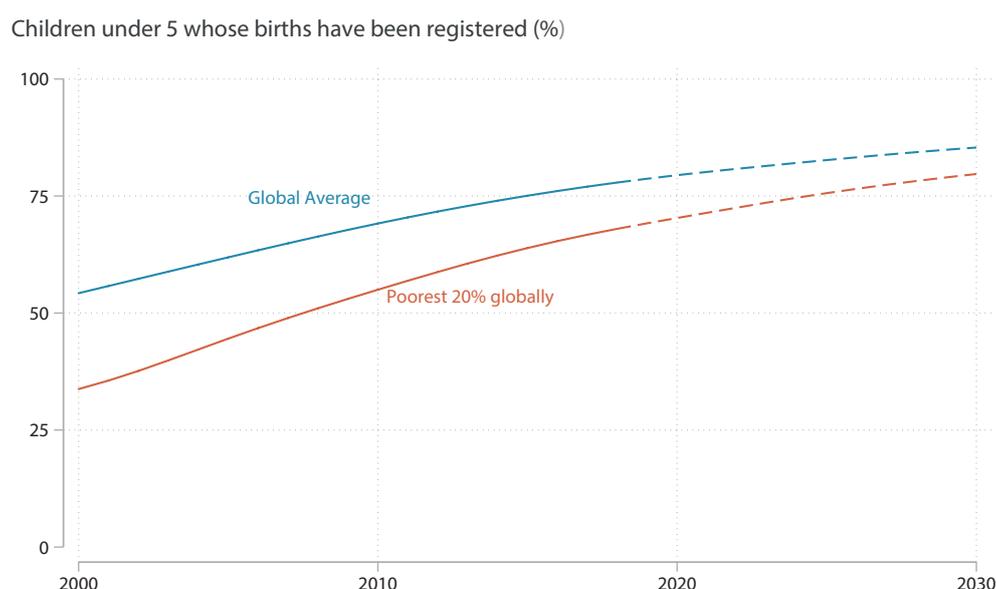


Data: **Save the Children calculations based on DHS/MICS, World Bank and UNICEF
Dotted lines indicate projections**

## 1.6 Poverty reduction and investment in children

Over the past three decades, many of the improvements in children's lives have been catalysed by the CRC. But underlying economic change has also enabled many of these gains. Since 1989, GDP per person has more than tripled in real terms, from around $5,000 to over $17,000 today. This massive increase in economic output has enabled many millions of families, and many governments, to invest far more in children's nutrition, health, and education.

Three decades of global economic growth has led to huge reductions in income poverty, with nearly 1.1 billion people having escaped the "dollar a day" income trap (or its updated equivalent) since 1990. It is also the case that global poverty reduction data conceals wide variations. Most of the people who have escaped extreme poverty have been in Asia, and hundreds of millions of the 'non-poor' live precariously, just above poverty lines. Growing inequality also means that growth has become less effective over time at reducing poverty, while the nature of economic growth raises serious questions about sustainability: many people who have escaped poverty face new and different threats to their wellbeing, including insecurity, environmental destruction, and frayed social ties.

Yet despite these challenges, many fewer children experience absolute material want today than was the case when the CRC was adopted. Government investments in some services for children, while often hard to identify within national budgets, have risen, according to World Bank estimates. Globally, between 1999 and 2015, national spending on education rose from 4.1 to 4.8% of Gross Domestic Product, and on health, over a similar period, from 4.6 to 5.8%. For countries that have invested efficiently, these spending increases have without doubt improved the lives of large numbers of children.

This participation takes many different forms, shaped by their evolving capacities. Participation is often most meaningful in settings closest to the child – in their homes, alternative care settings, schools, and communities where routine decisions are made. As children grow older, opportunities to participate in wider spaces with their peers, and with cultural, religious, and political actors are also important, including the design of public budgets, plans, policies and services.

The CRC has made governments and civil society organisations increasingly aware of the value of participation, reflected in national laws, policies, procedures and guidelines in education, health, care, protection, and justice. For instance, in a number of Latin American countries, children's representatives participate in municipal decision-making, including budgeting processes; and the voting age has been reduced to 16 years in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua. In Nepal, there are more than 23,000 community or school-based child clubs, which engage with local government, while Bangladesh and the Philippines also promote child participation in local decision-making.

Figure 5: **Countries with high child mortality are under-investing in health**

Health spending and child mortality
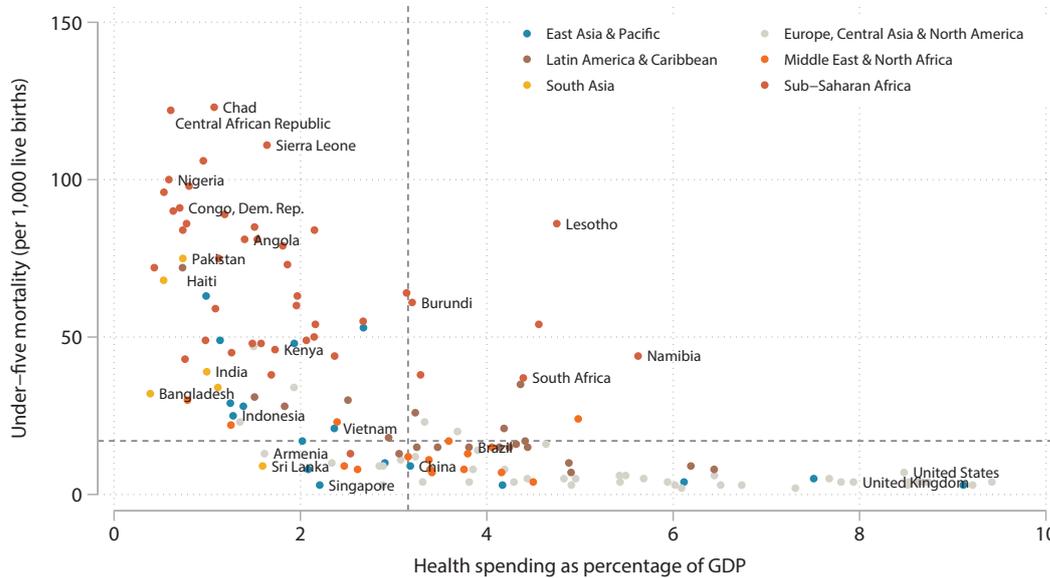


Data: **UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation / World Bank World Development Indicators**

A growing number of governments are also using increased revenues to lay the foundations of welfare systems that are designed, at least in part to safeguard children's rights. Most commonly, this is taking the form of cash provided as family or child grants, or as part of the response to humanitarian emergencies. Since 1989, social protection programmes benefiting children have spread from Europe and Latin America to cover millions of poor children in parts of Asia and Africa.[39] However, coverage is still patchy, with only about a third of children worldwide covered by such schemes. Many countries have also cut back on welfare provision since the global financial crisis of 2008-09, and most Low-Income Countries are still heavily dependent on aid for what are often pilot programmes, rather than universal systems. Nonetheless, a growing body of evidence shows that where social transfers are well designed and targeted, they can dramatically improve children's health, food security and learning.[40]

## 1.7 Conclusion

Over the last 30 years, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has revolutionised the status of children around the world. New laws and policies have created a framework for action. Increased public investment in services and interventions that benefit children, improved monitoring of progress, growing civil society engagement, and widespread poverty reduction have all contributed to a world in which children are healthier, better educated, and more protected than ever before.

Efforts to realise children's rights can now draw on a far more complete set of globally agreed goals and targets than has existed previously. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, set for the year 2030, reflect many of the promises made by governments when ratifying the CRC. They include targets to protect children from all forms of violence, promote gender equality, tackle other forms of discrimination, and end child labour and exploitation. Importantly, they're also applicable to all countries, regardless of income level. The next step is to apply these targets to governments' plans and budgets, and to create more effective mechanisms for monitoring and accountability, in which children are able to influence the decisions that affect their lives.

The new global agenda contains a further crucial provision: the promise to 'leave no one behind'. The last 30 years have delivered many of the CRC's promises, and in the process the lives of countless children have been bettered. But for many millions of children, that promise has been broken. These children are not accidental victims of misfortune, but the object of neglect, inaction and discrimination. A new era of commitment, action and justice is needed to realise the vision of the CRC.

# 2 The unfinished agenda

If the progress achieved for children since the adoption of the CRC is unprecedented, the unfinished agenda should not be underestimated. The Sustainable Development Goals – agreed at the UN General Assembly in 2015 – commit every country to ending extreme poverty, hunger and preventable child deaths, and ensuring that every child is learning, by 2030. Crucially, governments pledged to ensure that these targets are pursued with a strong focus on people who had been left behind by the previous generation of global commitments, the Millennium Development Goals. As such, the SDGs are a critically important test of governments' commitment and capacity to fulfil the promise of the CRC.

It's a promise that is being broken daily for millions of children. On current trends, almost two-thirds of developing countries are off-track towards meeting the SDG targets related to a cluster of basic needs, in areas such as food, health, education, water and sanitation, and energy.[41] For fragile states, this proportion rises to four-in-five countries.[42] From the perspective of children, the especially slow progress of the very poorest countries matters. These countries have proportionally large populations of under-18s, and their child populations are continuing to grow rapidly. They also have relatively weak states with limited capacity to meet people's basic needs.

In most middle-income countries, in contrast, deprivation is increasingly concentrated in particular geographic areas and social groups. But in both contexts, it's the poorest children who are being left furthest behind. Child mortality is a case in point. Children in the poorest fifth of households are 40% more likely than the global average to die before their fifth birthday. In 19 countries, including India and Nigeria, the gap in survival between the poorest fifth and the national average isn't set to close before the end of this century.[43] A similar pattern exists in the case of nutrition, with young children in the poorest families and in rural and remote areas more likely to be stunted.[44]

Poverty is disproportionately a condition of the young. Because poor households in most societies have more children, they are globally twice as likely as adults to be poor, and account for half of all people who remain in extreme poverty. On multi-dimensional measures, 700 million children are estimated still to be seriously deprived of their wellbeing and socio-economic rights.[45] Efforts to achieve the 2030 goals therefore needs to start with the recognition that interventions and policies targeted at children are needed to tackle the barriers that have left millions of people behind.

## 2.1  Children left behind

Behind national data there is a complex picture of specific groups of children being bypassed by recent gains. Despite many improvements in the status of girls, around the world they continue to face barriers to equality with boys (see box 5). For example, 5 million more girls than boys of primary age are out of school, girls are more likely than boys never to enrol, and female primary enrolment continues to lag behind boys in roughly 30 countries.[46]

> *"Child marriage in Chabota is caused by poverty... parents use small girls as capital to wipe away poverty"*
>
> Collins*, Zambia

The gender gap in education is particularly persistent at secondary level: while over two-thirds of countries have reached gender parity in primary schooling, less than one-third have reached it for secondary education. In West and Central Africa, for example, only 83 girls are enrolled in secondary schooling for every 100 boys.[47] There are a number of factors at work: some school systems prevent pregnant girls and young mothers from attending, while the absence of girl-friendly facilities and the risk of sexual harassment and assault, in school and on the way to school, all play a part.[48]

Figure 6: **Girls still lag behind boys in education outcomes**

Literacy rate, youth (ages 15–24)
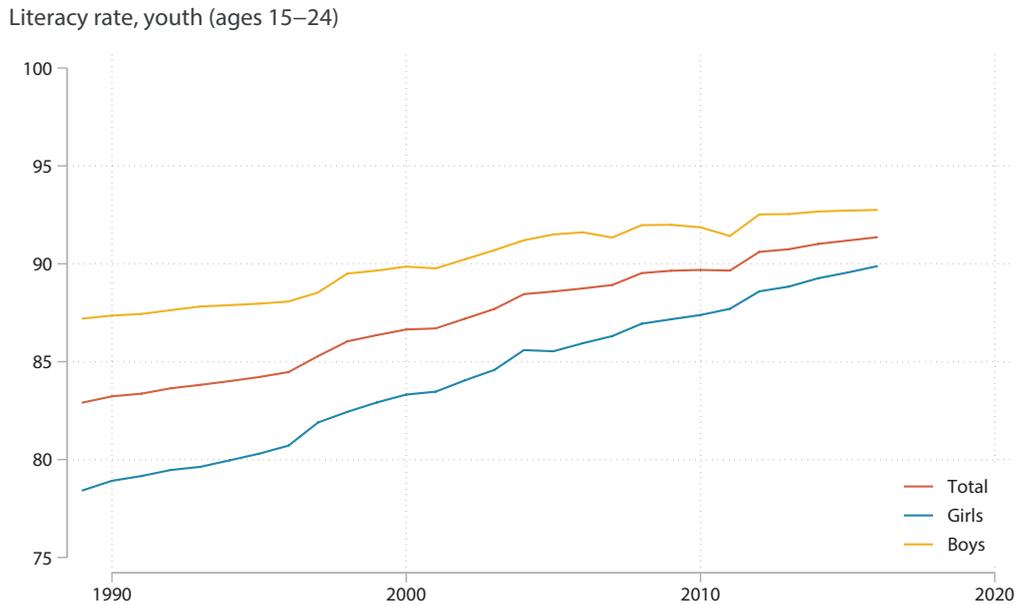


Data: **UNESCO/World Bank**

Girls face many other forms of disadvantage that reinforce and reflect gender-based discrimination. For example, child marriage, which overwhelmingly affects girls rather than boys, is strongly connected to school drop-out, risks of complication and death in pregnancy and childbirth, and a lifetime drop in earnings potential. Every year, 12 million girls marry before the age of 18, with an estimated 1 in 9 girls in developing countries married before the age of 15.[49]



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# BOX 5: **GENDER AND CHILD RIGHTS**

The principle of non-discrimination is at the heart of the CRC, and is the key to ensuring that rights are secured for all children, girls and boys. While discrimination takes many different forms, gender inequality remains one of the most persistent and widespread barriers preventing children, and especially girls, from realising their full and equal rights.

Despite important progress over recent decades, gender-based barriers systematically prevent girls and women from having access to, and control over essential services and resources. Harmful gender norms can also put obstacles in the way of girls and women being decision makers, thereby reinforcing the cycle of deprivation and marginalisation.

This discrimination translates into critical violations of rights. Twice as many girls as boys never attend primary school.[50] At least 1 in 3 women experiences gender-based violence, often starting in early childhood. Institutionalised violence, in the form of child marriage and a lack of protection of girls, contributes to making pregnancy-related complications and childbirth the leading cause of death amongst girls aged 15 and over.[51]

Poverty hits women and girls hardest. A 1% fall in GDP increases infant mortality by 7.5 deaths per 1000 births for girls, compared to 1.5 for boys.[52] Women and girls spend 2-10 times more time on unpaid care work than their male counterparts, and face critical barriers to equal participation and imbalances in power in different settings, including the home, workplaces, and legislatures.[53]

Gender discrimination leads to the rights of boys being violated, as well as girls. Boys are at particular risk of recruitment into armed groups and violent gangs, and are more likely to use violence to settle disputes. They are at greater risk of coming into conflict with the law. Cultural norms often deny boys the opportunity to express emotions, with male adolescent suicide rates more than double those for girls.[54] Rigid gender roles create barriers to boys being able to take on caregiving roles and share fairly in domestic labour.

Realising children's rights, and accelerating progress towards the SDGs, will require a much sharper focus by governments, civil society, and international institutions on gender equality. It will also require far-reaching changes in social attitudes and behaviour, to ensure that women and girls have the confidence, capability, access and agency to make equal and informed decisions, both in private and public life.

In some cases, gender disparities work in the other direction. In Latin America and the Caribbean, boys school enrolment has lagged behind that of girls for the last two decades, with only 90 boys in upper secondary education for every 100 girls.[55] And as the challenge in many middle- and upper-income countries shifts from getting children enrolled in school, to ensuring that they learn, boys are often falling behind. Among OECD countries in 2015, 15 year-old boys were on average two-thirds of a school year behind girls in terms of reading ability.[56]

Some groups of children face especially high barriers to securing their rights. By some estimates, 150 million children around the world have disabilities.[57] They are among the most structurally disadvantaged children in many societies, and are over-represented in poorer countries and amongst the poorest households: 1 in 5 of the poorest people in the world have a disability.[58] Disability is both a cause and consequence of poverty: disease, lack of medical care, malnutrition and conflict all make children in already poor families more likely to be disabled. But disability also pushes households into poverty, and makes it more likely that children will grow up without their rights secured.

As with many groups of children facing discrimination, data are patchy, but it's estimated that fewer than half of all children with disabilities complete primary schooling, and that one-third of all out of school children have a disability.[59] In Bangladesh, 30% of people with disabilities had completed primary school, compared with 48% of those with no disabilities.[60]

Adolescent children who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex, or who are identified as such by their community or peers, often face extreme vulnerability. In many cases, they're ostracised or bullied, in schools and at home, and in some countries they risk "corrective" violence or incarceration. Despite the evidence of vulnerability to violence and self-harm, publicly funded support services for LGBTQI children are under-resourced or non-existent in far too

many countries. Suicide rates amongst LGBTQI children are reported to be up to three times higher than for heterosexual children.[61] In Brazil, 12% of suicides, and almost 6% of murders amongst the under-19s are reported to have homophobia as a cause.[62] One Save the Children study in Vietnam found that LGBTQI children were more likely to end up living on the streets, to be without ID, rejected by their families, and forced into sex work and other forms of exploitation.[63]

Some of the children most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse are those living and working on the street. Definitions vary and there are gaps in the data, but it's estimated that tens of millions of children are affected.[64] In India alone, estimates range from 11-18 million children.[65] While the contexts in which they live and work vary widely, many such children have already been subjected to serious violations of their rights before they spend time on the streets, whether at home, or in care or juvenile justice institutions. Once on the street, many children are unable to get access to essential services, and report violence and abuse at the hands of police, and vulnerability to criminal gangs.[66]

For millions of children, a partial or complete lack of citizenship rights lies behind their exclusion from essential services, and undermines the realisation of other rights. An estimated 3.7 million refugee children are out of school, with refugees 5 times more likely to be denied the right to education than non-refugee children in their host countries.[67] In some cases, children forced from their homes by natural disaster and conflict are made doubly vulnerable, because identity documents that are critical to their ability to secure services are lost or destroyed, or because birth registration systems temporarily fail to function.[68]

In other cases, children are simply not documented. Despite progress since 2000, over one-fifth of births globally are still not registered, with 146 million children affected.[69] The impact is greatest on the poorest children, with births in the poorest 20% of households 15% less likely to be registered than the global average. The right to a legal identity matters in itself, but is

much poorer. For example, in Honduras, the most disadvantaged region, Lempira, has a similar multi-dimensional child deprivation score to the average for Haiti, a low-income country.[71] Ensuring that no child is left behind in efforts to achieve the SDGs will require governments to pay increasing attention to discrimination, and tackle underlying social and economic barriers to development.

## 2.2  Economic exploitation

Millions of children continue to be economically exploited in ways that cause immediate harm and long-term damage, and slow down progress towards the 2030 goals. Despite a global reduction in the number of child labourers, around the world 152 million children continue to work.  Approximately half of these children are engaged in what the UN describes as hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety, and moral development.[72]

Boys' and girls' experience of child labour differs. Boys are more likely to do hazardous work, while girls are more often expected to shoulder responsibility for household chores, something not captured in most official child labour estimates. Girls are also more likely to perform "double work duty", where they both do paid work and help in the home, especially with food preparation, cleaning, water collection, and child care. An estimated 58% of paid work by children is done by boys, although the incidence amongst boys has declined at twice the rate for girls in recent years.[73]

also a gateway to other rights. Conversely, a lack of paperwork establishing someone's identity often not only bars access to school, healthcare and welfare schemes, but also increases the risks of child labour, child marriage, and trafficking.

Unregistered births can be the first point in a lifetime of state-sanctioned discrimination, marginalisation and violence. The experience of the Rohingya people in Myanmar is a case in point: the country's 1982 citizenship law stripped Rohingya of citizenship and the right to self-identify. Long before the outbreak of massive state-sponsored violence in 2017, this led to draconian restrictions on daily life, including bans on unauthorised travel, work outside of home communities, and marriage without permission.[70]

Many of these sources of discrimination overlap and reinforce each other – a girl in a remote rural area who belongs to a discriminated ethnic group will be much more disadvantaged than an urban girl from an economically dominant ethnic group, for example. When data are disaggregated, to build up a more detailed picture of disadvantage, it illustrates this point: in many middle-income countries, excluded groups of children are faring worse than children in countries that are on average

> *"Girls are mistreated more than boys; when girls arrive home right after school, they start working. When boys leave their backpacks, they start playing; they do not want to help the girls, they cannot be sent to buy things"*
>
> Lenka*, Burkina Faso

A recent study of the decline in child labour over the past 20 years in Brazil and Mexico shows that while rising incomes and urbanisation played a major role, integrated policy responses had the biggest influence. Strengthened legal standards and regulation, social protection schemes that boost household income and help keep children in school, the expansion of education, and better pay and working conditions for adults combined to reduce the pressures on poor households to send children to work, and boosted the positive incentives for parents and employers.[74]

Children themselves have been largely excluded from efforts to tackle child labour, despite the evidence that increased dialogue with working children and their families is essential to the design, implementation and monitoring of effective policy (see Box 6).[75] Listening to children in work can also be an important element in their self-confidence, development and protection, and makes it more likely that they will defend their rights, and those of others, in the future.[76]

## BOX 6: TALKING TO WORKING CHILDREN

Recent consultations with more than 1,800 working children in 36 countries revealed a range of reasons for children's work, and showed positive and negative impacts. While some children say they chose to work to help their families, learn new skills or continue their education, others felt compelled to work. In some cases, the poor quality of education was cited as a reason for dropping out of school and entering the world of work. Some children described the struggle to balance work and study. A significant number described how their earnings enable them to meet school costs.

Working children emphasised the need for improved policies and practices which:
- **reduce family poverty and give parents access to decent work**
- **ensure free, quality education for every child and non-discriminatory access to other basic services (including birth registration)**
- **protect children from hazardous and harmful work and enforce regulations**
- **improve working conditions and support safe dignified work, where children are in work**
- **support vocational training that is inclusive of children with disabilities**
- **prevent and respond to the types of violence affecting girls and boys differently, in families, schools, workplaces and public spaces**
- **listen to working children and routinely involve them in policy development and implementation.**

*All information from Time to Talk (2018). Children's views on children's work. Kindernothilfe and Terre des Hommes.*

Conflict and humanitarian crises often intensify economic exploitation of children. Child labour in countries affected by armed conflict is estimated to be 77% higher than the global average, and the incidence of hazardous work is 50% higher.[77] Conflict and disasters are also drivers of trafficking, as children are uprooted and separated from their families.[78] In Nepal, for example, a recent national report commissioned by child-focused agencies described how the 2015 earthquake increased trafficking, as well as increased out-of-country migration for work.[79]

Detection, reporting and conviction rates for trafficking have risen globally, although it's less clear to what extent this is attributable to a more effective response by governments and public authorities, or a growth in the problem.[80] The extent to which children are affected varies – in West Africa, children account for a majority of trafficking victims – and there are important gender differences. Child trafficking for sexual exploitation overwhelmingly affects girls, and girls also account for a majority of trafficked children in Latin America.[81] An effective response to child trafficking requires strong collaboration between law enforcement agencies, child protection services, and communities of origin, transit and destination. It also demands that governments and law enforcement agencies give more attention to international collaboration, as growing numbers of children move across national borders.

## 2.3 Ending violence against children

Violence against children is arguably the area of the CRC where there is the largest gap between aspiration and realisation. In consultations with children across every region of the world, to prepare for the UN Sustainable Development Goals, violence emerged as their most urgent concern, with specific calls to end bullying, labour exploitation, child marriage, child trafficking, corporal punishment, female genital mutilation and cutting, recruitment by armed actors, and violence in schools.[82] Children consulted for this report underscored the particular importance of efforts to prevent

violence in homes and schools.[83] Violence against children is complex and difficult to tackle. Firstly, most violence against children is perpetrated within homes and communities, by parents and other adults with a responsibility for their care and wellbeing. By definition, much of what happens in a family setting is out of sight, and there are vigorous debates in many countries about the extent to which government services should intervene in family life where there's a concern that violence is taking place. This is easier to do where the violence in question breaks the ethical codes of the community in which it happens. But it's also true that a lot of violence is deeply rooted in social attitudes and norms that the community upholds, and which take time and effort to change.

Secondly, while much of the violence experienced by children is at the hands of adults, in many cases children are experiencing violence at the hands of other children. For example, in Latin American and the Caribbean, where intentional homicide rates against children – most of them adolescent boys – are the highest in the world, the incidence has risen by 4.5% since 2000.[84] A majority of the perpetrators are acquaintances, many of them also in their teenage years.[85] Less dramatically, but more pervasively, bullying by peers is cited by children around the world as a major concern, with online violence and bullying a growing phenomenon that exposes children to new risks (see box 7).

> *"Social networks make you lose part of your privacy… we have the right to privacy and the law should protect us in that area"*
>
> Jorge*, Spain

Thirdly, violence against children is closely tied to power. Children are often vulnerable because they're physically smaller than the people exercising violence, and because

their voice typically counts for less – both in law, and in custom. Children often describe their fears of speaking up, and victims of violence often receive threats to keep silent, and lack knowledge about to whom they can report.[86]

Groups of children who are already marginalised are especially vulnerable to these abuses of power. A WHO 2012 review reported that children with disabilities are 3.7 times more likely than children without disabilities to be victims of violence; and 2.9 times more likely to be victims of sexual violence.[87] Children with disabilities and very young children are often unaware of their rights and may be physically unable to speak out about abuse.[88] In India, children from scheduled castes often experience violence at the hands of people from upper castes, often for perceived transgressions such as accessing water from public sources, or participating in religious events.[89]

## BOX 7: VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN A DIGITAL WORLD

As access to the internet expands, online violence is a growing concern for children around the world. For example, one in four children in the UK aged 11-16 years have been upset by experiences on social networking sites.[90] Risks include bullying and discrimination, often with a gender dimension; grooming for sexual exploitation; and sharing of extreme content, including pornography and violent images. Although the relationship between online and offline violence is debated, there is evidence that online abuse creates a permissive atmosphere in which physical violence can be more easily triggered.[91] The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women launched a recent report on online violence against women and girls, setting standards and guidelines for states on this issue.[92]

Recent consultations undertaken by ChildFund with more than 5,000 children aged 10-12 years old across 15 countries reveal that children feel least safe on the internet and social networks, and want to play an active role in violence prevention.[93]

## 2.4 The dimensions of violence against children

Efforts to tackle violence against children need to start with the understanding that it plays out differently at different stages of a child's life, and for different groups of children. For example, adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to sexual violence, and boys face an increased risk of homicide, while younger children are most exposed to violent discipline in the home.

Typically, violence against children begins in the family: worldwide, 76% of children under the age of 14 have experienced physical punishment in the home.[94] Indeed, physical discipline is an accepted norm in many societies, with more than 1 in 4 caregivers globally saying that it is necessary in order to properly raise or educate children.[95] While there are variations between countries, within countries physical discipline in the home is relatively constant across the sexes, and between different income groups.[96] Even where it is illegal, attitudes can be slow to shift. More than 15 years after corporal punishment was banned in Germany, 17% of German adults consider a light slap in a child's face to be a legitimate punishment.[97]

Figure 7: **Exposure to violence changes during childhood**



**Prenatal and birth**

HOME

Sex-selective abortion
Witnessing intimate partner violence

**Early childhood 0-4**

HOME

Witnessing domestic violence
Violence discipline at home
Neglect
Homicide

**Middle childhood 5-9**

HOME    SCHOOL

Violence discipline at home
Corporal punishment at school
Witnessing domestic violence
Bullying by peers  at school
Physical fights at school
Sexual violence

**Early adolescence 10-14**

HOME    SCHOOL    COMMUNITY

Sexual violence
Bullying by peers  at school
Physical fights at school
Witnessing domestic violence

**Late adolescence 15-19**

HOME    SCHOOL    COMMUNITY

Intimate partner violence
Sexual violence
Physical violence
Homicide

Data: **Know Violence in Childhood 2017**

Violence against children often has a close connection to violence against women, and one can normalise the other, where young children witness domestic violence against their mothers. It can also reinforce violence in other institutions, especially schools and nurseries, where treatment of children usually depends on the tacit support of the community. A study in Brazil, by World Vision and Instituto Igarapé, found that 40% of children do not feel safe in school, and 25% suffer or have already suffered threats, or physical or verbal violence.[98] A similar survey carried out by Save the Children in Peru reported that 45% of adolescent children have seen someone beaten at school.[99] Despite the evidence that violence in and around schools worsens learning outcomes, and contributes to school drop-out, 69 countries around the world continue to allow teachers to use physical punishment in schools.[100]

> *"Our teachers come to the classroom with a mobile phone in one hand and a cane in the other."*
>
> Mehedi*, Bangladesh

Child protection systems in many countries do a poor job of preventing, and responding to cases of violence in home and community settings. In part, this is because they're relatively new, and widely under-funded, but also because such violence is often viewed as being an inevitable, if unfortunate fact of life.[101] Protection services are especially weak where children are on the move. Children in humanitarian contexts, who are often unaccompanied and separated from parents, are particularly in need of stronger support, with targeted efforts needed to integrate child protection into emergency preparedness, response, and reconstruction processes, and to manage vulnerable children as they cross national borders.[102] [103]

Shortcomings in child protection extend to justice systems in many countries. Around the world, children continue to be tried in adult courts; are incarcerated with adults; and lack specialised support or care. Children who live and work on the streets, and children who are separated from their parents, face a higher-than-average risk of police harassment, unfair arrest, detention, and violence.[104] Juvenile justice systems often lack independent advocacy and complaints mechanisms and are poorly resourced.[105]

Some important progress has been made in reforming juvenile justice, and applying non-custodial measures. For example, South Africa's Child Justice Law, adopted in 2008, has reduced child detention by about 90%, and in the US, detention rates have gone down by about 50% over the last 20 years.[106] A recent report on children's access to justice across Africa also reports progress, but at the same time identifies serious challenges. These include limited specialisation in justice systems to address the needs of child victims and witnesses; a dependence on NGO-led and privately funded legal aid services in many countries;

and barriers to fair treatment for children with disabilities and child victims of sexual offences.[107] In some countries, reforms have gone into reverse. In Brazil, rising violent crime has driven a growing public movement that has successfully campaigned for a reduced age of criminal responsibility.[108] The recent detention of large numbers of children from families linked with 'Islamic State', IS-controlled, in Iraq has led to widespread mistreatment and abuse, while many European governments have publicly questioned the application of established legal norms to citizens who moved to IS controlled territory as children.[109]

Sexual violence against children is another area where progress is difficult to gauge. Data are too limited to map trends since 1989, and because of the stigma attached to sexual violence it often goes underreported.[110] Yet what evidence exists points to a widespread problem: UNICEF estimates that 15 million adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 have experienced forced sex in their lifetime.[111] In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than 13% of all women and almost 8% of adolescents 15-19 acknowledged experience of sexual violence.[112] Much more needs to be understood about the scale and nature of sexual violence against boys, but available evidence shows that girls face particular risks. This is especially true in conflict settings, with sex widely used as a tool to terrorise and intimidate, including in the violence against Rohingya in Myanmar in 2017, and in the ongoing conflicts in eastern DRC.[113] Post-conflict societies, and societies affected by high levels of violent crime, often also see high levels of sexual violence against children. Colombia is a case in point, with adolescent girls especially affected, and recent rises in reported incidents against very young children, under the age of four.[114]

The trends are clearer in the case of homicide than for sexual violence: 95,000 children a year – 70% of them boys – are victims of murder. In most parts of the world, children are less likely to be murdered today than at the turn of the century.[115] But Latin America and the Caribbean bucks the trend: the region is seeing rates rise, and while being home to only 10% of the world's adolescents, accounts for 50% of child murders.[116]

> *"The politicians should invest more in schools and understand there are not only bandits in the slums, there are many children… who want their rights respected."*
>
> Laura*, Brazil

The effects of violence in the most murderous societies are often similar to those in conflict zones – children experience trauma and lifelong physical injury; are afraid to go out; and see learning disrupted. In El Salvador, schools are used as recruiting centres for armed gangs, with students and staff dropping out to escape violence: up to 39,000 students dropped out of the public school system due to violence in 2015.[117] The violence in Central America's Northern Triangle, with murder rates exceeding those in many conflicts, has also contributed to mass displacement. One recent study calculated that each ten additional murders in the region caused six more children to migrate to the United States, with spikes in violence as the main factor behind child migration.[118]

The cumulative cost of the violence described here is enormous, on the health of individual children, their emotional and behavioural development, and the ability to form relationships.[119] These personal costs have both a societal impact, in terms of loss of trust, social capital and foregone human development, and a huge economic impact. It's estimated that including losses in future productivity, the annual cost of violence against children can be anywhere between 2 and 5% of global GDP.[120]

Reaching the 2030 goals, and realising children's rights, hinges on a massive and sustained reduction in violence against children. The goal of ending violence needs to be pursued in a way that combines relentless pursuit of a long term vision – that of a world in which children are protected, and their rights respected – with clear and realistic plans that deliver effective changes in laws, policies and practice.

## 2.5 The implementation gap

The CRC has spurred the adoption of new commitments to children, in constitutions, laws and policies. But despite the near-universal ratification of the Convention, the track record of translating these commitments into real and lasting change for children has been uneven.

There are a number of reasons for this implementation gap. One key factor is a lack of sufficient public investment in services that are critically important for children. Most countries fall short on spending the 5-6% of GDP that is widely agreed to be necessary to ensure universal coverage of essential health care. According to the World Bank, government spending on health is just 2.8% of GDP in middle-income countries, and 1.2% in low-income countries. In fact, health spending has fallen in low-income countries since 2005. Nutrition fares similarly poorly, with an estimated $23.25 billion in additional funding needed annually to tackle the problem by 2030.[121] Global estimates of the funding gap for education, across all developing countries, are $1.8 trillion a year by 2030.[122]

Domestic revenues will be the main way in which this investment gap is bridged: in many countries that means broadening and deepening the tax base, ensuring progressive taxation and eliminating opportunities for tax avoidance and evasion.[123] According to the Overseas Development Institute, low-income countries have the potential to increase their tax revenues from 17% to 19% of GDP; and middle-income countries from 25% to 30%[124]. International tax avoidance and evasion alone cost developing countries nearly $1 trillion in 2014.[125]

Foreign aid has a critical role to play in the poorest countries, as a complement to domestic resources. However, there's a frequent gap between donor pledges, commitments and disbursements.[126] Meanwhile some key sectors are notoriously underfunded. For example, in 2015 interventions to end violence against children accounted for just over 0.1% of total aid.[127]

Fulfilling the promises made in the UNCRC and the SDGs requires governments to invest first in the children who've been most left behind. But most countries' current approach to budgeting is a blunt instrument: classification systems often don't allow allocation and spending on children to be tracked. Together with a lack of disaggregated data on the status of children, this makes it difficult for governments to make informed decisions about where best to direct public spending.

Low government spending on essential services, and spending skewed towards better-off populations, is particularly damaging for the most disadvantaged families, which have proportionally more children, and fewer resources with which to access alternative private providers.[128] Where government spending is inadequate, user charges often fill the gap – either as a matter of policy, or as informal payments. These tend to punish the poorest households, with health charges especially – which are difficult to predict and lumpy – a major cause of families being plunged into poverty.[129]

In many countries, delivery of the CRC has been hindered by governments' failure to put in place the mechanisms, institutions and


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processes needed to ensure that children's rights are actively considered and supported, when new policy is drafted and implemented. More recently, the World Bank and UNICEF have developed tools that enable countries to undertake child-specific impact assessments of policy reforms.[130] However, for some of the poorest countries, funding and capacity is a constraint, with children's rights often left as the responsibility of under-resourced ministries of women's and children's welfare that have limited leverage over more powerful parts of government.[131]

Data presents further barriers to implementation. Good quality, timely data are critical to tracking progress in realising children's rights, and targeting interventions. Over the last 30 years, there have been major improvements in its collection and publication. Yet major shortcomings persist. A lot of data are only available as national averages, making it difficult to monitor progress for children who've been left behind, and to target interventions to those who most need them.[132]

Disaggregation by gender, age, disability, locality, ethnicity and care status is increasingly important as many rights violations become more concentrated amongst disadvantaged groups of children. There are other biases in data collection: large-scale surveys tend to gather data from the head of the household and often exclude children's perspectives, as well as failing to count the many highly disadvantaged children who live outside of households, or – as in the case of children with disabilities – are hidden from view.[133]

Data in national and international statistical systems are still very limited for over half of the child-related indicators for the SDGs.[134] But a lack of data does not excuse the failure to meet obligations to children. It should instead be a catalyst for improved systems that collect, analyse and apply disaggregated data, and for innovative methods and technologies that help adults to listen regularly to the views of children themselves. These changes need to be implemented in a world that is itself constantly changing, in ways that create new opportunities for children, as well as threats.

# 3 Child rights in a changing world

Fulfilling the promises made in the UN CRC hinges on a second child rights revolution. But to be successful, that revolution needs both to respect the unchanging principles that underpin the CRC, and recognise the rapidly changing world in which it needs to be applied.

The power and promise of rights are rooted in their universality and indivisibility. Every child, regardless of place, economic situation, or social background, has the same inalienable claims, and the state has the same fundamental duties. By definition, no one right can be pursued at the expense of another. This is both a moral standpoint, and a common-sense insight. The child who is hungry is unlikely to learn and at increased risk of illness, and the society that tolerates gender-based violence is unlikely to listen to children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out in four articles the principles that should guide the realisation of rights: on non-discrimination; on making the best interests of the child the primary consideration in any decision that affects them; on the right to life, survival and development; and the right to freely express views and be heard. In practice, many countries have a patchy track-record of upholding non-discrimination, and of the rights to life, survival, and development. The two other principles, of best interests, and of participation, have been only partially articulated, and poorly implemented. Yet it's these two principles which have the potential to transform the world for children, and fulfil the promise of the CRC.

## 3.1 Best interests

Some states, including Colombia, Senegal and Mauritania, have taken steps to include the best interests principle in legislation, policies and strategies relating to children.[135] In 2008, Moldova adopted a regulation on the procedure for the return of victims of human trafficking, smuggled migrants and unaccompanied children. For the first time, it embedded the principle of a child's best interests in procedures governing the repatriation of Moldovan children.[136] Some

international guidelines, such as those from the UN refugee agency, UNHCR are similarly designed to identify best interests and apply these to decision-making.

However, in practice 'best interests' are often vaguely defined, and poorly applied.[137] For example, recent research in Spain and Germany found that despite improvements in legislation, the precedence of the best interests of the child is rarely mentioned, or respected in legal practice.[138] In South Sudan, the 2008 Child Act includes a statute on children's best interests but leaves this undefined.[139] In reality, the Act allows customary laws to hold sway, including those that allow early marriage, and the forced marriage of adolescent girl survivors to the adult male perpetrators of sexual violence as a 'settlement' – having been interpreted as the 'best interest of the child' by traditional justice holders.[140]

> *"We do not want adults to always act on our behalf without us…. what is for children, but without children, is against us children"*
>
> Naserian*, Kenya

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has reached similar conclusions, raising concerns that the best interests of the child principle is inconsistently interpreted in courts, and in child-focused institutions, including schools.[141] Remaining gaps in legislation and monitoring urgently need addressing, and all institutions working with and for children need to adhere to agreed standards on the best interests of the child and how it is implemented in their work.

# 3.2 Children's right to be heard

One of the boldest changes initiated by the UN CRC was the commitment to children's participation in decisions that shape their lives. In the last 30 years, children have become significantly more visible in legislation, policy development and decision-making.[142] Since 2014, children are in principle supported to independently report child rights violations outside of their national jurisdiction, although 135 countries have so far neither signed nor ratified the Optional Protocol to the CRC on a Communications Procedure.[143] At the local level, children are increasingly involved in decision-making in a range of settings, including schools, health facilities, and child- and youth-led organisations.

Attitudes towards children's participation are evolving, especially where children have growing numbers of channels through which to make themselves heard, independent of their parents.[144] Technology is playing a growing part in this shift, as adolescent children especially are organising without the mediation of adults. A growing number of campaign movements, from the school climate strikes initiated by the Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg, to student campaigns on road traffic safety in Bangladesh, and gun control in the USA, reflect this change.[145]

Increasingly, this technology is available to children in poorer countries. In 2014, the developing world accounted for more than three-quarters of all mobile phone subscriptions. Mobile services and the internet are used by growing numbers of children to communicate with each other as well as with their peers and families. Digital technology, although it carries new risks for children, can also boost children's rights, giving them access to information and providing platforms for children and young people to mobilise and express their views.

The demand for increasing participation and voice for children was heard in the process to develop the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Consultations carried out by ChildFund found that participation in development came across as one of the strongest aspirations of children: in over a quarter of countries, children said that they wanted to be actively listened to, by adults and decision-makers.[146] Two of the targets that were subsequently adopted in 2015, on ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making (target 16.7), and on public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms (target 16.10) provide a foundation for strengthened engagement by children in efforts to achieve the SDGs.

Although data on freedom of association are limited, informal evidence suggests that there are a growing number of child-led organisations and initiatives, including working children's associations, children's councils, and media initiatives by young people.[147] These initiatives are most likely to flourish where there's some level of political decentralisation and local governance is strong; and where civil society organisations have freedom of expression and a history of engagement in rights issues. Child-focused organisations have played a critical role in promoting practical ways for children to be heard in different

settings, and in fostering learning about how this can happen safely and meaningfully.

At the international level, space for children's engagement has also expanded. The 2002 Special Session on Children, which reviewed progress since the 1990 World Summit, was the first time that children addressed the UN General Assembly, setting a new benchmark for children's participation in multilateral decision-making. More recently children were extensively involved, through 'The World We Want' consultation, in the shaping of the SDGs, and growing attention has been given to children's experiences as human rights defenders, including by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.[148]

Yet despite these changes, children – especially children before adolescence – are still widely treated as passive recipients of decisions taken by adults. Barriers exist at every level of society, from a lack of recognition in law and policy; to limited adult capacity to facilitate child participation in safe and meaningful ways; and a lack of access to justice for children needing to challenge violations of their rights.[149]

These barriers tend to be biggest where children want to engage in civic action and influence public decision-making. An increasing number of governments are censoring children's access to information, especially in areas such as sexual health and sexual identity, making it more difficult for children to make informed decisions and avoid discrimination.[150] A recent consultation of over 2,500 children across 53 countries found that children are organising themselves to influence a wide range of issues, including sexual violence, indigenous rights, and conditions for refugees. Yet children also cite concerns about safety, a lack of access to information, and funding constraints.[151]

Despite the CRC's recognition of children's right to freedom of association and to peaceful assembly, few governments allow legal registration of child-led organisations and networks, and governments, donors and civil society organisations often create bureaucratic obstacles that make it difficult for children's organisations to apply for and manage their own funds. Child-led associations, networks and movements also do not always get the right support from other civil society actors, including international child-focused NGOs. There are examples of children's groups and clubs being manipulated to meet others' ideological agendas, and of children being exposed to risk and abuse.[152]

Participation can carry other risks for children. Children who speak out can face humiliation and bullying from parents, teachers and peers. In other situations, they can be subjected to serious violence, including at the hands of the state.[153] The outbreak of the Syrian civil war, sparked by the disappearance, torture and murder of a 13 year-old boy who had protested in public, is just one example of state-sponsored violence against children who exercise their civic rights.[154]

Adults, and organisations working with children, have a responsibility to help carefully manage risks to children, in line with their evolving capacity and best interests. Risk-taking by adolescents is a normal part of child development, and can be positive, especially when children have supportive relationships with adults.[155] As children get older, adults need to be willing to share more power with children. Increasing children's access to information and


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involving children in identifying and mitigating risks can be an important part of decision-making in a child's best interests.

The increasing reliance on social media and the internet to exchange information and organise is also creating new risks for children. In most countries around the world there is little legal protection of children's right to privacy, creating a risk of surveillance, both by the state and by parents. There are also critical questions for societies, and for policy makers, about children's ability to erase their digital footprint, where it could affect their future education, employment, or personal safety.

Discrimination against already marginalised groups of children can further restrict their ability to participate in decision-making processes, and make themselves heard. For example, in many contexts girls who take on

visible leadership roles in communities risk social ostracism.[156] For some groups, including children with disabilities, and children who speak minority languages, states have a particular responsibility to remove barriers to participation.

Removing the obstacles to child participation is an end in itself. But it is also one of the most important keys to unlocking progress towards the 2030 goals. There's clear evidence that children who are able to use their voice and understand their rights are less likely to be exploited, or subjected to violence.[157] And as the unfinished agenda around the Sustainable Development Goals becomes increasingly concentrated amongst structurally disadvantaged populations, only a child rights approach will tackle legal, policy, budgetary and attitudinal barriers to change.

## BOX 8: CHILDREN'S VIEWS ON PARTICIPATION

In consultations around the world, children express a common frustration that adults often disregard their views. Children who are members of associations have described the benefits of being organised, supporting one another, and learning about and defending their rights. They have also spoken about the advantages and disadvantages of online information, and the need to protect themselves on social media and the internet.

*"If children belong to an association they can give their opinions and give their proposals to those that will help us be listened to, and defend our well-being."* **(working child, Peru)**

*"It is one thing to seek children's views before developing a policy or programme, but it's important that children's views are properly incorporated. Children should be involved to monitor if things are going right."* **(14 year old boy, member of a children's organisation, Bangladesh)**

*"Spaces for participation, where children are respected by adults, should be promoted, as adults think they are the only ones who are right, and they dismiss children's points of view."* **(16-year old girl, Nicaragua)**

*All quotes and information taken from national consultations carried out by Joining Forces member organisations as background research for this report*

## 3.3  A changing world – demography, conflict and climate change

A second revolution in child rights needs to happen in a world that is experiencing tectonic changes. When the CRC was adopted in 1989, the world was a very different place. One-third of the global population lived in centrally planned, socialist economies. That global population had only just exceeded 5 billion people. The world's first pocket mobile phone came onto the market, priced at $3,000.[158] China was the world's 11th largest economy, one place behind Spain.[159]

The CRC is now being implemented in a world with a dramatically different demographic profile. At almost 8 billion, today's population is over 50% larger than in 1989. Almost 2 billion of these people are children under the age of 15 – double the number in 1960. However, the share of under-15's in the global population has fallen over the same period, from 35% to 27%. Although projections are within a sizeable margin of error, most predict that with falling fertility rates, the world is on the verge of getting to 'peak child' – the point where the number of

children in the world reaches a historical high, and hits a plateau before falling.[160]

In principle, achieving the rights of today's cohort of children – especially those rights that rely heavily on public investment – should be easier as their share in total population falls. However, as populations age in many countries, the dependency ratio between those who are economically active and economically dependent isn't necessarily declining, and is instead placing new and different demands on government spending.

Meanwhile the global distribution of children is shifting towards poorer countries. By the end of the century, higher-end projections of Africa's population predict it to be equal to Asia's, at approximately 4.5 billion, with one billion children under the age of 15 living in the region.[161] In any scenario, the achievement of child rights in the coming decades will be tested most severely in Africa, where income poverty is deepest, the growth in the child population is rapid, and where state capacity, measured by tax take, is low.

In all regions except for Africa, children today are more likely to live in cities than the countryside. Moves to cities have been accompanied by increasing diversity in the kinds of families in which children are growing up. The proportion of reproductive age adults who are married is declining in almost all regions.[162] A growing number of children are growing up in one-child households, and in smaller households, with the potential to receive more attention and investment from their parents.[163]

Growing elderly populations and increasing migration for work are also leading to growing numbers of children being part-raised by grandparents, or left caring for them: China's generation of 70 million left behind children, living in rural areas without their parents, who've moved to coastal economic hubs, is a case in point.[164] Children without parental care are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, are less likely to be in education and have access to essential services, and risk long-term emotional damage.

Children continue to be over-represented amongst the poor, with one-fifth of all children below the age of 5 in the developing world living in extremely poor households.[165] These children face a heightened risk of malnutrition, sickness, school drop-out and work in dangerous or exploitative conditions. Increasingly, extreme poverty is shifting towards Conflict Affected and Fragile States (CAFS). Whereas in 2008 they accounted for 14% of global poverty, this had risen to 23% in 2015.[166] By 2030, it is expected that CAFS' share of poverty will exceed 50%.[167] The rise is mirrored by a steady increase in the number of children living in areas impacted by conflict: In 2017, 1 in 5 children worldwide were affected, a near doubling of the number since 1989.[168] Children in the Middle East are at the greatest risk of exposure to conflict, with 2 in every 5 children living within 50km of a conflict event.[169]

Just as the drivers of conflict are changing, so too is the conduct of war. Battlefields are no longer clearly defined, and there's been a rise in reports of deliberate targeting of traditional safe spaces such as schools, hospitals and places of worship.[170] Children are increasingly in the frontline: radicalisation of children by armed groups; the use of children as suicide bombers, including in North East Nigeria and Afghanistan; and the killing of children as a result of indiscriminate violence against civilian populations, including through aerial attacks, all pose a growing threat to children's rights.[171]

The indirect impacts of conflict on children are greater still. An estimated 100,000 infants die annually from conflict-related causes, including hunger, and the collapse of health systems and water supplies.[172] An estimated 12.8 million people in Syria, and 9.7 million in Iraq, have little or no access to basic healthcare – in countries where near-universal coverage of healthcare existed before the outbreak of war.[173] In Syria, it is estimated that around 2.8 million children – half of all school-aged children – are out of school, one-third of them due to security concerns and two-thirds due to financial hardships, or as a result of child labour and destruction of infrastructure.[174]

At the same time that it destroys infrastructure, conflict is forcing millions of children from their homes: in 2017 alone, 17 million children were forcibly displaced due to conflict and violence.[175] It is estimated that 50 million of the world's children have migrated across borders or have been forcibly displaced within their own countries,[176] and the number of people displaced as a result of armed conflict, human rights violations, and climate change has dramatically increased over the past decade.[177]

Climate change is part of a set of mutually reinforcing environmental threats – including species extinction, desertification, and pollution of water sources and soils – that are increasingly contributing to crisis, displacement and conflict, even if the causal links aren't fully understood.[178] In many cases, children are first and worst affected by climate-related natural disasters, and by the impact of climate change on food production, disease and access to water.[179] Over 99% of deaths already attributable to climate-related changes occur in developing countries – and children make up over 80% of those deaths.[180] Over half a billion children live in areas with extremely high risk of flooding; 115 million are at high or extremely high risk from tropical cyclones, and almost 160 million are exposed to high or extremely high drought severity.[181]

Climate change arguably poses the single biggest challenge to the achievement of child rights, and threatens to undo much of the hard-won progress of recent decades to improve the lives of children. Meeting the challenge will demand serious attention to equity, in at least two dimensions. Firstly, richer countries have contributed disproportionately to the problem: the poorest 50% of the world's population contribute just 10% of all carbon emissions.[182] Industrialised countries have a unique responsibility to ensure that the targets set by the UNFCCC are met, and that poorer countries are supported to manage the effects of climate change that are already irreversible. Secondly, climate change raises serious questions about inter-generational justice. Today's children have not made the choices that created the current crisis, but will live with the consequences. Adult decision-makers have a particular responsibility

to ensure that actions are taken now to ensure that a habitable planet and sustainable economy is bequeathed to today's children, and to future generations that have yet to be born.

## 3.4 Political threats to child rights

At a moment when environmental and demographic changes threaten to undermine the realisation of child rights, the UN CRC is running into growing political headwinds. Civil society space is being squeezed in a growing number of countries, both as a result of formal changes in laws and regulations, and because of more informal pressure. CIVICUS, a civil society network, estimates that civic space is under serious attack in over half of all countries, with a narrowing of space in a number of high-income countries, which have traditionally been seen as champions of civil society.[183] This is having knock-on effects on children's engagement. Child-focused INGOs in India found that civil society service delivery is less contested, but that activities designed to hold institutions to


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account; and to changes policies, laws and structures in support of children are being compromised.[184]

International law requires every state to ensure an enabling environment where members of civil society, including children, can function effectively, transparently and independently. These norms are coming under growing challenge at the international level, in the United Nations and other global forums, in ways that threaten to further erode space for child rights at the national level.

The shrinking of space for civil society consultation and participation in multilateral forums is mirrored by some governments' challenge to some of the underlying principles of child rights. Powerful UN member states, including the USA, Russia, Saudi Arabia, China, Turkey and Brazil are challenging more flexible definitions of family, weakening references to gender, and the rights of girls and women in UN documents, and promoting communal rights and the rights of parents in contradistinction to child rights.

For example, a group of member states spearheaded by Russia and Egypt at the UN in Geneva, has worked with traditionalist groups to secure Human Rights Council resolutions on the protection of the family, and treated elements of the CRC as threatening to social stability. Increasingly the child protection agenda has been co-opted by such groups into a narrative based on traditional family values and parental authority.[185]

These tensions are a timely reminder that child rights continue to be contested in some quarters, and that some states see accountability for their commitments in the CRC as a challenge to their authority and control. Yet without robust accountability, the gains made for children since 1989 risk being eroded. Completing the agenda begun 30 years ago requires renewed political commitment to the vision of the CRC, by states, and by international institutions, civil society and other influential actors who affect children's lives.

## Conclusion
# A call to action

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was revolutionary at the time of its adoption. Thirty years on, it has lost none of its urgency or relevance. The CRC made children visible as subjects and holders of rights in a new and startling way. It was universal, both in its wide ratification and in its spanning of economic, social, political, civil and cultural rights. It introduced the principle that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions affecting children's lives, and that children themselves should play a role in defining those interests. It underscored the inalienability of rights, and the obligation of states – individually and collectively – to realise the rights of every child, without any kind of discrimination.

As this report has shown, the CRC has helped to transform the lives of millions of children, through changes in laws and policies, and social practices. Yet despite that progress, millions of children have been bypassed by a rising tide of prosperity and opportunity, because of who they are, or where they live. This is a moral, legal and economic failure that the world can ill-afford.

The question now is how to translate the formal support for the rights enshrined in the CRC into an irresistible force for change. The Sustainable Development Goals, with their broad approach to economic and social development, and peace, security and environmental sustainability, can be a powerful springboard for implementation of the CRC. But to succeed, the SDGs also need child rights as a central reference point. Action to tackle the new threats of the 21st century, and confront the multiple forms of discrimination that affect children, will happen only where children themselves are able to be agents of change.

Realising the vision of the CRC, and securing the rights of every child, is a formidable challenge. But 2019 has the potential to be a turning point for a number of reasons. First, all states have committed to collaborate on building sustainable societies that "leave no one behind", regardless of age, gender, income, geography, ability or identity. There is now a decade – little over half of the time a child takes to reach adulthood - to

meet the goals for 2030. Agility, determination and political courage will be needed to fulfil this promise, in a context of huge social and economic inequalities, widespread violence, and the erosion of some of the recent gains for children.

Secondly, there is a demographic window. While the world holds the largest ever generation of children and young people, children are falling as a share of total population. This should provide an opportunity for governments to respond more effectively to children's needs. Yet there is also a challenge, in that children are increasingly concentrated in the poorest countries, and are disproportionately likely to be poor and deprived of their rights. Failure to secure child rights in the poorest countries, with fast-growing populations of children, risks a ruinous legacy for the next generation.

Thirdly, there is a growing bank of resources to improve the lives of children. The world has more knowledge of how children grow and develop; and technical solutions to respond to children's needs. There are unprecedented financial resources, and new ways of organising and communicating that have the potential to change the future of millions of children.

These opportunities are real, but they can be seized only if the boldest elements of the CRC are delivered. This will require a fundamental shift, in which all children are treated as holders of rights, to whom adults and governments have corresponding obligations. Giving children a real voice, and listening to and heeding their views, will be crucial to progress in areas where it has been most lacking, including violence against children. Change must begin within families and communities – as the proverb has it, it takes a village to raise a child. But space for children's rights relies, in turn, on wider civic rights that allow all people to participate in their societies as active citizens. Other actors, including the private sector, media and religious institutions, need to be able to play their full part in the achievement of these goals and rights.

# 4.1 Recommendations

Delivering the CRC will require coordinated national and global efforts, led by governments, which take seriously the guiding principles of the UN Convention: the best interests of the child; non-discrimination; the right to life, survival and development, and the right to participate.

It will also demand that governments apply the lessons of the last 30 years, which demonstrate what is possible, even in poorer countries with limited resources, but also point to major shortcomings in current approaches to child rights. Governments, working with other stakeholders, should:

**1. Reaffirm political commitment to children's rights** by fully embracing the CRC, including its Optional Protocols, without any reservation, and following through on implementation at the national and local level. Governments should adopt and implement legislation, policies, budgets and programmes of action that are inclusive of all children, and recognise the distinct needs of children at different stages of childhood, and the different experiences of boys and girls. They must identify and address all forms of discrimination and violence that are preventing children from realising their rights, ensuring that the best interests of all children are given primary consideration.

**2. Invest today for a sustainable tomorrow**: governments should invest in essential services, infrastructure and systems that safeguard the rights of children to an adequate standard of living, health care, education, family support, safety and protection, and play and recreation, to the maximum extent of available resources. To do this, governments must raise revenues and spending, in a way that promotes the rights of the poorest and most vulnerable children. Governments of wealthier countries should support, in line with their international obligations, the efforts of poorer countries to invest in children. The impact on children's rights should be a litmus test of all public spending, with governments tracking and reporting on public expenditure in ways that are accountable to children.

**3. Track and demonstrate progress for all children**, especially those most left behind, by strengthening local and national systems for collection, analysis and dissemination of high-quality data. Data should be disaggregated by age, sex, and other dimensions of inequality. It should also be analysed and applied alongside qualitative data, including systematic feedback from children and families. Governments should monitor progress against the full range of children's rights, including those where major data gaps currently exist; and ensure that data includes groups of children – including stateless children, refugees, and children with disabilities – who are often excluded. Governments should regularly report on progress through publicly accessible products; and provide regular reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and other international and regional human rights bodies.

**4. Listen and respond to children** by making sure that all children, responsive to their age and capabilities, know and understand their rights; have the space to regularly and safely express their views and needs; and receive full responses on how their views have been taken into account. Governments should work with civil society to support children's participation and voice at the family and community level, recognising that it is a right that must be respected and fulfilled, and uphold the rights to freedom of expression and opinion, and to peaceful assembly and association, and access to information.
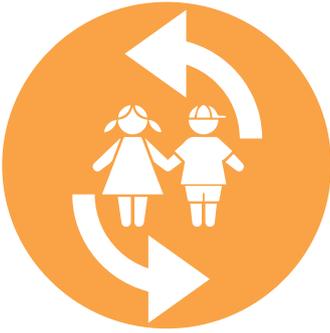
**5. Make national commitments now** that will be game changers for the lives of children over the next decade:

Apply a child rights approach to Agenda 2030, ensuring that no child is left behind, by adopting laws, policies and budgets that promote gender equality, and create convergence between the poorest and most marginalised children and their better-off counterparts, while building universal coverage of services, systems and infrastructure.

Adopt time-bound plans to end violence against children, in line with SDG target 16.2 and other targets related to violence, where necessary passing laws, investing in child protection systems, and working with civil society – including children's organisations - to change attitudes and behaviours that expose children to violence.

Ensure effective enforcement of laws and policies designed to end violence against children, including systems to investigate and prosecute violations against children; and continued strengthening of international mechanisms to protect children, including the UN MRM.

Urgently address the global climate crisis and environmental threats in a way that safeguards children's rights, by meeting existing international obligations on climate change; taking steps to decarbonise economies and mitigate already irreversible impacts; and by assessing environmental impacts on children and young people and engaging them fully in strategies to meet environmental challenges.

Prioritise strategic windows of opportunity in early childhood and adolescence, through policies and budgets, supporting interventions in nutrition, play, education, health and protection that yield lifelong individual and societal benefits, and break the inter-generational transmission of poverty and exclusion.

Educate to achieve children's rights, by investing in universal coverage of quality education at primary and secondary levels, and through education systems promoting civic engagement, and human rights education.

# Notes

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# Joining Forces: Child Rights Now! country members:

**Bangladesh:** Joining Forces members: Education and Development Foundation – Educo – Member of Child Fund Alliance; Plan International Bangladesh; SOS Children's Villages Bangladesh; Terre des Homes Italia; Terre des Homes Lausanne; Terre des Homes Netherlands; Save the Children International; and World Vision Bangladesh, with the support of: Foundation for Disaster Forum; **Brazil:** Joining Forces members: ChildFund Brazil; Plan International Brazil; SOS Children's Villages International; Terre des Hommes International Federation; and World Vision International, with the support of: Ideario Consultoria and Enfoque Social; **Cambodia:** Joining Forces members: ChildFund Alliance; Plan International Cambodia; Save the Children International; SOS Children's Villages Cambodia; Terre des Hommes Netherlands; and World Vision International Cambodia; **Colombia:** Joining Forces members: Fundación Plan Colombia; Save the Children International; SOS Children's Villages; Terre des Hommes; and World Vision, with the support of: Alianza por la niñez Colombiana; 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