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Follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit

The responsibility to protect and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity

Responsibility to protect: prioritizing children and young people

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The present report serves to highlight the special needs of children and young people in contexts of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and the extent to which they are targeted and affected by those crimes, albeit differently in both armed conflict and non-armed-conflict situations.

In the report, the Secretary-General encourages Governments to prioritize the protection of children and young people from atrocity crimes as a whole-of-government imperative. He reaffirms that prevention is the most important part of the responsibility to protect populations from atrocity crimes and that this means building societies in which atrocity crimes are unlikely to occur. To that end, he encourages national Governments and those supporting them to address the risk of atrocity crimes by identifying and responding to early warnings; honouring legal commitments relevant to the protection of children and young people; promoting socioeconomic inclusion and equality; addressing identity-based intolerance and hate speech; leveraging the education sector to promote tolerance, respect for diversity and social cohesion; pursuing accountability for atrocities against children and young people; and putting children and young people at the centre of atrocity prevention efforts, including by respecting principles relating to child rights and by leveraging the capacities of children and young people.

* The present report was submitted late owing to delays in the approval process.



The Secretary-General also stresses that, in implementing the above priorities, national Governments will require the engagement and support of civil society and other non-Government actors; multilateral and bilateral State and institutional partners; data regarding situation-specific risk factors, lessons learned and good practices in atrocity prevention globally; and related United Nations mandates, programmes and initiatives, including the children and armed conflict agenda, the youth, peace and security agenda and the sustainable development agenda.

I. Introduction

1. In the 2005 World Summit Outcome document, Member States recognized that each State had the responsibility to protect its populations from atrocity crimes, namely, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. They expressed dismay at the increasing number of children involved in and affected by armed conflict and other forms of violence and conveyed their support for cooperation policies aimed at strengthening national capacities to improve the situation of those children and to assist in their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.¹

2. Since then, States have repeatedly reaffirmed that commitment. The Security Council has adopted 86 resolutions in which it referenced the responsibility to protect, including 7 in which it explicitly affirmed the relevant paragraphs of the World Summit Outcome document. The General Assembly has adopted 32 resolutions touching on the responsibility to protect, including 6 in which it explicitly reaffirmed or recalled the relevant paragraphs of the World Summit Outcome document. In 2021, the Assembly decided to include the item entitled “The responsibility to protect and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” in its annual agenda and requested the Secretary-General to report annually on the matter.² The Human Rights Council has addressed the responsibility to protect in more than 60 resolutions. Overall, 61 countries and two regional organizations have appointed focal points for the responsibility to protect, and 53 States and the European Union are members of the Group of Friends of the Responsibility to Protect in New York and Geneva.

3. States have also unequivocally committed themselves to the protection of children’s rights, both in peacetime and in situations of armed conflict. At the international level, the protection of children’s rights is primarily codified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol thereto on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Those instruments are supplemented by the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and the Additional Protocols thereto, as well as by declarations and statements of commitment regarding children’s rights.³ For the Security Council, the need to monitor, report on and ultimately end grave violations against children in armed conflict has been a priority for more than two decades. The Council has adopted several resolutions in that regard, the most recent of which contained condemnation of attacks and threats of attacks against schools, educational facilities and civilians connected with schools.⁴

4. In the past decade, the issue of young people in the context of peace and security has also garnered increased attention. In a series of resolutions on youth and peace and security, the Security Council has recognized that young people⁵ in particular, especially young women, are adversely affected by armed conflict and that young people have a vital role in preventing and resolving conflict and sustaining peace.⁶

5. Despite those statements of commitment, children and young people continue to be targeted by and caught up in atrocity crimes. The plight of children in situations of armed conflict, in particular, has been extensively documented. They have been

¹ General Assembly resolution [60/1](#), paras. 138–141.

² General Assembly resolution [75/277](#).

³ The Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups; the Safe Schools Declaration; and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers.

⁴ Security Council resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#).

⁵ “Youth” was defined by the Security Council in its resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#) as referring to persons aged 18 to 29 years.

⁶ Security Council resolutions [2250 \(2015\)](#), [2419 \(2018\)](#) and [2535 \(2020\)](#).

killed and maimed, including in indiscriminate attacks on schools and hospitals, have been recruited into armed forces and armed groups, have been detained, tortured and abducted and have faced rape and other forms of sexual violence. They have witnessed atrocities and suffered unimaginable trauma, have become acutely malnourished and have even starved to death owing to the breakdown in social services commonly associated with organized violence, or sometimes intentionally by parties to armed conflict, and have seen their access to life-saving humanitarian assistance endangered. Their education has been disrupted or even halted, compounding their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

6. Although atrocity crimes are usually committed in the context of armed conflict, that is not always the case. Conditions conducive to atrocity crimes can include the inequitable distribution of power and resources, intolerance towards diversity and exclusionary ideologies and their manifestation in identity-based discrimination and hate. These risk factors can be present even in relatively stable societies, sometimes specifically targeting children and young people.

7. In practice, young people do not always have access to the social, economic and political rights to which they are entitled, which can heighten the impact of the social and economic disruption commonly associated with atrocity crimes. Violations against young people are monitored and reported on under the auspices of several United Nations work streams, such as conflict-related sexual violence and human rights mechanisms. Despite young people also being disproportionately affected by armed conflict and violence, including through the particular risk of sexual and gender-based violence against young women and girls during such periods, no special protection is accorded to them in those situations. While it is recognized that most young women and men play a positive role in sustaining peace and preventive efforts, some of them are also vulnerable to being radicalized and caught up in violence themselves.

8. In the first report on the responsibility to protect, issued in 2009,⁷ the Secretary-General elaborated on three interrelated pillars: (a) the responsibility of the State to protect its populations, whether nationals or not, from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, as well as from their incitement; (b) the commitment of the international community to assist States in meeting those obligations; and (c) the responsibility of Member States to respond collectively in a timely and decisive manner when a State is manifestly failing to provide such protection. In subsequent reports,⁸ the Secretary-General outlined a series of actions that States can take across each of those three pillars. The risk or impact of atrocity crimes on children and young people has not, however, been addressed in those reports, nor has the special responsibility of States to protect them from those crimes been emphasized. The contribution that children and young people can make to the prevention of atrocity crimes has also not been highlighted.

9. In the present report, the Secretary-General seeks to fill in those gaps by spotlighting how children and young people are especially vulnerable to and affected by atrocity crimes and proposing priorities for more focused attention and action to enhance their protection and agency. In the report, he builds on related dedicated or cross-cutting initiatives and agendas of the United Nations, including the children and armed conflict agenda, the youth, peace and security agenda and the sustainable development agenda, and on the work of other international and regional organizations and non-governmental organizations in these areas. He affirms the relevance of those agendas to the responsibility to protect and draws attention to the

⁷ A/63/677.

⁸ The reports are available at www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/key-documents.shtml.

lessons learned through them that can assist States in strengthening their efforts to build societies in which children and young people are not at risk of atrocity crimes.

II. Risk of atrocity crimes and their impact on children and young people

10. Children and young people are especially vulnerable to atrocity crimes and are affected in different ways. The impact of atrocity crimes on children in the context of armed conflict, in particular, has been well documented under the auspices of the Security Council's children and armed conflict agenda. In the case of young people, as highlighted recently by the Secretary-General in his report of on youth and peace and security, the safety, security and protection of young people has not improved. Civic space online and offline has been shrinking, which has created acute participation and protection challenges for young people, such as reprisals and intimidations.⁹ However, relative to the situation of children, there is a paucity of information regarding the way in which young people are vulnerable to and affected by atrocity crimes.¹⁰ In both armed conflict and peaceful situations, both children and young people can intentionally be targeted by atrocity crimes, become victims of indiscriminate violence or find recovery difficult, owing to their heightened vulnerability to exploitation and abuse, as well as long-lasting physical and mental trauma.

11. Because the perpetrators of atrocity crimes typically seek to instil maximum terror on targeted populations, children in particular can be intentionally targeted, abused or exploited. Children have been used to extract ransom or as bargaining chips to initiate prisoner swaps, subjected to sexual slavery, executed in public and forced into the role of executioner. Children continue to be recruited and used by armed forces and armed groups, including by groups designated as terrorist entities by the United Nations. Since 2005, more than 93,000 children have been recruited and used by parties to armed conflicts.¹¹ Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and international humanitarian law, the recruitment of children under the age of 15, and their use in hostilities may constitute a war crime. Children and young people who are recruited and used by armed forces or groups are at risk of death or injury, sexual violence, poor living conditions and forced substance abuse. Boys in particular, whether actually or allegedly associated with armed groups, including terrorist groups, are liable to be treated more as security threats than as victims of human rights violations and can be detained, abused, tortured and held in conditions that do not accord with international standards of juvenile justice. Children and young people recruited and used by armed forces and groups are, in some cases, forced to commit acts of extreme violence, including against their families or communities. They may suffer long-term psychological and physical impacts and be ostracized by their former communities, making reintegration extremely difficult.¹²

12. Children and young people are being killed and injured in attacks directed at civilians and civilian infrastructure. Even where civilians are not intentionally targeted, the urban character of today's armed conflicts and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas renders children and young people highly vulnerable to

⁹ [S/2022/220](#).

¹⁰ *If I Disappear: Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space* (United Nations publication, 2021).

¹¹ *Study on the Evolution of the Children and Armed Conflict Mandate 1996–2021* (United Nations publication, 2022).

¹² Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, "Reframing child reintegration: from humanitarian action to development, prevention, peacebuilding and beyond", 2021.

being seriously injured or killed in indiscriminate attacks.¹³ Globally, more than 100,000 children have been killed or maimed since 2005 by parties to armed conflicts.¹⁴

13. Young women and girls, but also young men and boys, are disproportionately vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual violence that may constitute a war crime or crime against humanity or may be committed as part of a tactic of war, a campaign of genocide or ethnic cleansing. In 2020, the United Nations verified more than 1,200 incidences of rape and other forms of sexual violence against children in the context of armed conflicts, one of the highest annual totals since 2005.¹⁵ That number is likely to underrepresent the reality of sexual violence faced by children and young people, which is largely underreported, owing to the fear of reprisal and harmful social norms that survivors experience. The physical and psychological consequences can be devastating and lifelong and may be compounded by the lack of services for survivors and accountability for perpetrators and by survivors being stigmatized and/or rejected by families, heightening their vulnerability to various forms of exploitation and abuse, including sexual exploitation and trafficking.

14. Children and young people suffer unimaginable physical and psychological trauma from being victims of or having witnessed atrocity crimes, often with lasting effects on their mental health. During episodes of mass violence, community and social support structures and services, such as schools, that might normally help children and young people process their experiences may be unavailable or under attack, making recovery difficult. Mental and psychological development is heavily dependent on conditions encountered during childhood and youth. Instability, such as in situations of armed conflict, exacerbate the risk of mental health conditions and psychosocial problems among children and young people.¹⁶

15. One of the most enduring impacts of atrocity crimes on children and young people is the loss of education that is typically associated with armed conflict. Despite sustained international advocacy, schools and universities continue to be attacked and used by parties to armed conflicts for military purposes; they are also targeted for attacks by groups designated as terrorist entities by the United Nations. Protected persons in relation to schools, such as teachers and students, continued to be threatened or attacked. Between 2015 and 2019, there were more than 11,000 attacks on and military use of education facilities globally, affecting at least 22,000 students.¹⁷ Given the positive role education plays in promoting social cohesion, the negative impacts of the loss of education on efforts to prevent atrocities are severe. Moreover, many children and young people whose education is disrupted in periods of crisis never return to formal learning.¹⁸ This is especially so in the case of girls and adolescents, who commonly do not return to secondary education following a disruption.¹⁹ All of this heightens their vulnerability to various forms of exploitation and abuse and reduces their economic opportunities in the long term.

¹³ See www.unicef.org/protection/protecting-children-from-explosive-weapons.

¹⁴ *Study on the Evolution of the Children and Armed Conflict Mandate 1996–2021* (United Nations publication, 2022).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), “Mental health and psychosocial support: technical note”, September 2019.

¹⁷ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, *Education under Attack 2020* (2020).

¹⁸ World Bank, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF, *The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery* (Washington, D.C., Paris and New York, 2021).

¹⁹ UNESCO, *Education for All 2000–2015: Achievements and Challenges* (Paris, 2015); and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Marrying Too Young: Ending Child Marriage* (New York, 2012).

16. The commission of atrocity crimes is often associated with large-scale displacement. In 2020, 42 per cent of all forcibly displaced people were children.²⁰ Some children and young people have spent years or even their whole lives forcibly displaced. They face myriad risks and heightened exposure to exploitation, exacerbated by the fact that in displacement settings children and young people are often out of school and lack the basic services necessary to meet their physical, social and psychosocial needs. Girls and young women face an especially high risk of sexual and gender-based violence and abuse. Much of the international attention on atrocity crimes against children and young people is focused on situations of armed conflict. Children and young people are, however, also vulnerable to or victims of atrocities in non-armed-conflict settings. Even in relatively stable societies, identity-based marginalization and exclusion, and the institutionalization and propagation of intolerance and hate that often precede atrocity crimes, can be felt keenly by children and young people. Identity-based intolerance and hate is especially pervasive in the digital spaces to which young people have access and can also be pronounced in the educational and social settings inhabited by children and young people. Research also suggests that young people are disproportionately victimized and traumatized by armed groups, terrorists or violent extremist groups, gangs, organized crime networks and repressive governments, in both armed conflict and peaceful settings.²¹ The independent progress study on youth, peace and security supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Peacebuilding Support Office in 2018 served to highlight the ability of violent groups to tailor their recruitment strategies to young people, by offering a ready-made community and identity and the opportunity to be part of a cause that could be especially attractive to young people.²²

III. Advances in protecting children and young people from atrocity crimes

17. Over the past few decades, States have taken significant steps to better protect children and young people from atrocity crimes and have overwhelmingly supported the international framework for the protection of children's rights in both armed conflict and peace. All States but one have joined the Convention on the Rights of the Child, thereby committing themselves, inter alia, to ensuring, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and development of children and to protecting them from all forms of physical and mental violence, and 172 States are parties to its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. There is widespread ratification of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). Regarding armed conflict, most States have become parties to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols I and II thereto, which, inter alia, provide for humanitarian protection to those who do not take a direct part in hostilities, as well as specific protections for children.²³

18. States have also adopted several multilateral guidelines, principles and statements of commitment that are focused on grave violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflict. These include the Principles and Guidelines on Children

²⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020* (Copenhagen, 2021).

²¹ Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (UNFPA and Peacebuilding Support Office, 2018).

²² Ibid. See also Peace Direct, "Atrocity prevention and peacebuilding: key insights and lessons from a global consultation convened by Peace Direct", 2018.

²³ Information on the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols thereto is collected by the International Committee of the Red Cross and is available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/vwTreaties1949.xsp>.

Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007), the Safe Schools Declaration (2015) and the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers (2017). States have also supported, and continue to support, important intergovernmental and civil society-led initiatives, including the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, the Group of Friends of Children in Armed Conflict and the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers.

19. Regional organizations have also advanced normative and institutional frameworks for the protection of children, including in armed conflict. Especially significant among those are the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia, the Declaration on the Commitments for Children in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights.

20. States' efforts to protect children in the context of armed conflict have been enhanced by the Security Council in placing the matter on its agenda in 1999 and in establishing the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict in 2005.²⁴ Under the auspices of that mechanism and of Council resolution 1460 (2003), 37 parties to conflict have developed action plans with the United Nations to address grave violations against children, and 12 of those parties have fully complied with their commitments.²⁵ In 2021, as reported by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, several States took steps towards ending the grave violations and abuses of children's rights. Those steps included policies, legislation, plans, directives and judicial proceedings in relation to the recruitment and use of children and other grave violations and abuses by armed forces and/or armed groups.²⁶ Several States have also developed policies and undertaken commitments to refrain from the military use of schools,²⁷ including through the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration.²⁸

21. Alongside this work to advance the protection of children in armed conflicts, there has been growing recognition of the impact of armed conflict and violence on young people and the contribution that they can make to preventing conflict and peacebuilding and to the creation of cohesive and tolerant societies, in which the risks of atrocity crimes are thereby reduced.²⁹ In 2015, the Security Council recognized the disruptive impact of armed conflict on education and economic opportunities for young people and affirmed that they could play an important role in conflict prevention.³⁰ The following year, both the Council and the General Assembly reaffirmed the important role that young people could play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts through their meaningful participation and representation in peace and political processes.³¹ In 2020, the Council recognized that the protection of young people in armed conflict and their participation in peace processes could significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and

²⁴ Security Council resolutions 1261 (1999) and 1612 (2005).

²⁵ Information regarding the action plans is available at <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/action-plans/>.

²⁶ A/HRC/49/58.

²⁷ Security Council resolution 2601 (2021).

²⁸ A/75/873-S/2021/437.

²⁹ See, for example, S/2022/220.

³⁰ Security Council resolution 2250 (2015).

³¹ Security Council resolution 2282 (2016); and General Assembly resolution 70/262.

security.³² UNFPA and the Peacebuilding Support Office have supported a major study on how best to support the agency, leadership and ownership of young people in efforts to build sustainable peace,³³ and a number of resources have been developed to enhance the protection of young people and the implementation of the youth, peace and security agenda, including, most recently, a guide for public officials and a five-year strategic action plan for youth-inclusive peace processes.³⁴ The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women has pointed out that it is crucial to include young women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, as post-conflict situations can open up opportunities for advances in gender equality, which, in turn, contributes to building peaceful, resilient and inclusive societies.³⁵

22. The impact of armed conflict and violence on young people and the imperative to support youth engagement in conflict prevention and peacebuilding has increasingly been recognized by national and regional actors. Among other developments, as detailed in the 2022 report on youth and peace and security, States have launched national action plans on youth and peace and security; integrated youth and peace and security into national laws and policies; and established dedicated capacity for youth and peace and security in government ministries and/or other entities.³⁶ At the regional level, relevant instruments and statements of commitment, some of them predating the adoption by the Security Council of its youth, peace and security agenda, include the African Youth Charter, the Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security of the African Union, the Ibero-American Convention on the Rights of Youth, the Council of Europe youth sector strategy 2030 and a statement by the ASEAN Regional Forum on promoting the youth, peace and security agenda.

23. Those complementary areas of work, with their focus on both the impact of armed conflict on children and the youth, peace and security agenda, are the building blocks of a strategy to protect children and young people from atrocity crimes and to ensure the meaningful participation of young people in efforts to prevent and address atrocity crimes. As highlighted above, atrocity crimes are most often committed in situations of armed conflict, and most of the grave violations of children's rights that comprise the focus of the children and armed conflict agenda can, themselves, constitute atrocity crimes. The work accomplished under the auspices of the United Nations children and armed conflict agenda therefore serves to establish the ways in which children are most often affected by atrocity crimes and the priority interventions required to end and prevent violations against children. Alongside that work, efforts made with regard to youth, peace and security shed light on the impact of armed conflict and violence on young people and serve to highlight the role that they can play in building and sustaining peace.

24. However, the priorities identified by the two agendas do not comprehensively encapsulate the suite of options available to better protect children and young people from atrocity crimes or the way in which the two demographics can be engaged in doing so. From an atrocity-prevention perspective, the priorities and accomplishments of the two agendas leave three key gaps. First, the children in armed conflict agenda is dedicated to contexts of armed conflict and tends to be focused on

³² Security Council resolution [2535 \(2020\)](#).

³³ Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (UNFPA and Peacebuilding Support Office, 2018).

³⁴ Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security, *Implementing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at Country-Level: A Guide for Public Officials* (New York, 2022); and Irena Grizelj and Ali Saleem, "We are in this together: operationalizing a five-year strategic action plan for youth-inclusive peace processes", 2022.

³⁵ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, "Young women in peace and security: at the intersection of the YPS and WPS agendas", April 2018.

³⁶ [S/2022/220](#).

either addressing the causes of armed conflict or alleviating the effects of mass violence once it is already under way. In the literature on atrocity prevention, however, it is recognized that risk factors are present to varying degrees in all societies; that the risk factors for atrocity crimes are similar, but not identical, to those for armed conflict; and that the key to atrocity prevention is for all States, irrespective of the presence of immediate triggers, to identify relevant risk factors and address them as much as possible. That entails, among other things, building societies that promote socioeconomic equality, that value difference and diversity and that have systems in place to identify and respond to early warnings. In that regard, atrocity prevention has as much in common with the sustainable development agenda as it does with the more obviously related agendas of children and armed conflict and youth, peace and security.

25. Second, as alluded to already, while grave violations against children are documented by the monitoring and reporting mechanism, much work remains to be done in understanding the extent to which young people, too, are disproportionately vulnerable to and affected by atrocity crimes. Similarly, although protection is one of the five pillars for action articulated by the Security Council in its resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#), the need for targeted strategies to protect young people, as a distinct group, from armed conflict has, to date, not received due attention from Member States.

26. Lastly, the children and armed conflict agenda does not address the critical role that children can play in building sustainable peace. Although opportunities for such engagement are clearly limited once atrocities are being committed, the role of children alongside young people in longer-term atrocity prevention efforts must be acknowledged and facilitated.

IV. Seven priorities for protecting children and young people from atrocity crimes

27. During General Assembly debates on the responsibility to protect, Member States have frequently stressed the primacy of prevention. The Secretary-General has made prevention a priority since assuming office. The horrific impacts of atrocity crimes on children and young people visible around the world attest to the fact that, once atrocity crimes are ongoing, options for protection are limited, politically fraught and, too often, fail altogether. The most effective way to guarantee that children and young people are safe from atrocity crimes is to prevent them from occurring in the first place.

28. In previous reports on the responsibility to protect, including in the 2019 report on lessons learned for prevention,³⁷ a number of policy areas and measures have been set out for States to consider in their endeavours to prevent atrocity crimes. In the present report, the Secretary-General reiterates the importance of those steps and builds on them by highlighting seven priorities which, if pursued vigorously by national Governments, could be especially transformative for the protection of children and young people. While they are focused primarily on the responsibility of States, they also serve to provide guidance for the international community at large in prioritizing support for national Governments in meeting their responsibility to protect.

³⁷ [A/73/898-S/2019/463](#).

A. Identify and respond to early warnings

29. In his previous reports on the responsibility to protect, the Secretary-General highlighted the importance of collecting and analysing early warning information, including at the local level and with gender-specific indicators and data alluding to race and ethnicity so as to be able to identify risks due to discrimination and/or marginalization.³⁸ To that end, the Secretary-General has called upon States to conduct periodic national atrocity risk assessments,³⁹ for which the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes is a critical prevention tool.⁴⁰ In the current report, he reiterates that, whether in the form of periodic national assessments or through more informal data collection and monitoring, effective early warning capabilities, in particular at the local level, can make the difference between early indicators of atrocity risk being detected and addressed and their becoming precursors of mass violence. In the present report, the Secretary-General again stresses that early warning information should, where possible, be not only gender-specific, but also age-specific.

30. Children and young people have a critical role to play in detecting early warnings of atrocity crimes. They may be keenly attuned to escalating frustration, unrest, discrimination, hate speech and identity-based violence in their educational and social settings and to violent messages shared through social media; they could thus provide information and a perspective on atrocity risk that may not be available to other population groups. Young women and girls may be especially alert to increased threats of gender-based violence, which can be early signs of atrocity crimes. The potential insights, contributions and engagement of children and young people should therefore be given special consideration and supported in the design of early warning systems, with due consideration for the “do no harm” principle.

31. In order to be able to facilitate the prevention of atrocity crimes, early warning information gathered from children and young people at the local level must feed into processes that will enable an escalating response, first at the local level, then, as necessary, at the national level, with international support upon request. The need for strengthened links between early warning and response, with national ownership and international support, was highlighted by States in the informal, interactive dialogue held by the General Assembly in 2016 on the responsibility to protect.⁴¹ While national human rights institutions have an important role to play in such processes, they typically do not have a presence at the community level. To be able to benefit from insight and expertise provided by children, young people and local actors, such institutions should therefore become closely and adequately linked to them.

B. Honour commitments for the protection of children and young people

32. As the Secretary-General has consistently reiterated in his annual reports on the responsibility to protect, the responsibility of States to protect their own populations from atrocity crimes is, in essence, a restatement of commitments already enshrined in international law. As noted above, States have almost unanimously joined the core

³⁸ See, in particular, [A/67/929-S/2013/399](#) and [A/72/884-S/2018/525](#).

³⁹ See, for example, [A/71/1016-S/2017/556](#), para. 15.

⁴⁰ Developed by the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect and available at www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf.

⁴¹ United Nations, President’s summary of the informal, interactive dialogue of the seventieth session of the General Assembly on the responsibility to protect: mobilizing collective action – the next decade of the responsibility to protect, New York, 6 September 2016.

international legal instruments for the protection of children and young people. Nevertheless, some States parties to those treaties continue to fail to address and prevent atrocities targeting children and young people. Therefore, a critical step that States can take to protect children and young people from atrocity crimes is to fully implement the relevant legal instruments⁴² to which they are already parties, join those to which they are not and incorporate those instruments into national legislation. States should also fully cooperate with United Nations treaty bodies and international human rights mechanisms, including by providing full access to the special procedure mandate holders of the Human Rights Council, cooperating with the universal periodic review process and implementing the recommendations provided by human rights treaty bodies, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

33. As noted in section III, since 2005, many States have, with the support of the United Nations, developed action plans to prevent or end grave violations of children's rights. Those efforts are welcome. It is equally important for States with action plans in place to fully implement them, and for those that do not yet have action plans in place to work with the United Nations to develop them.

34. As also recognized in section III, in addition to the international legal instruments for the protection of children and young people, important legal instruments also exist at the regional level.

C. Promote inclusion and socioeconomic equality

35. Enabling conditions for atrocity crimes may include structural inequality, discrimination, marginalization and exclusion. In previous reports on the responsibility to protect, it was noted that discrimination can be political, social or economic in nature.⁴³ Manifestations of discrimination include the underrepresentation or exclusion of population groups within legislatures, the security sector or the judiciary; the denial of citizenship or the right to profess a religion or belief, targeting members of a community; and socioeconomic disparities among communities.⁴⁴ Addressing discrimination in all its forms by adopting laws, policies, plans and budgets to ensure that everyone is able to participate fully in economic, social and political life, regardless of ethnicity, culture, religion, race or gender, is one of the most important actions that States can take to protect children and young people from atrocities in the long term.

36. Through the Sustainable Development Goals, a framework has been set out for achieving gender equality (Goal 5) and reducing inequality (Goal 10), among other objectives.⁴⁵ Within that overarching framework, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in its 2019 *Human Development Report*, proposed a more specific framework and policies to redress inequalities, reduce disparities in

⁴² Including the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols thereto; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Second Optional Protocol thereto, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol relating thereto; the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol thereto on the involvement of children in armed conflict; the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; and the Arms Trade Treaty.

⁴³ See, inter alia, [A/67/929-S/2013/399](#).

⁴⁴ [A/67/929-S/2013/399](#), para. 19.

⁴⁵ General Assembly resolution [70/1](#).

capabilities and foster the inclusive expansion of income.⁴⁶ In the report, UNDP further underlined that addressing those inequalities and disparities successfully would likely require targeted or affirmative action to tackle deep-seated discriminatory norms and harmful stereotypes, prejudices and practices.⁴⁷ All of those aspects are critical for building stable, resilient and sustainable societies.

37. One of the most critical ways in which States can advance socioeconomic equality is to ensure equitable access to education. Access to education for marginalized and excluded groups promotes upward socioeconomic mobility and, if coupled appropriately with other strategies, can redress intergenerational grievances that might otherwise fuel violence. The aim of Sustainable Development Goal 4 is to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education by 2030; nevertheless, in 2018, about one fifth of all school-aged children globally were out of school.⁴⁸

D. Value difference and diversity and manage intolerance and hate

38. Alongside inequality and discrimination, atrocity crimes can also be spawned by intolerance of difference and diversity and its manifestation in derogatory stereotyping, stigmatization and incitement to hostility and violence. In the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, launched in 2019, the Secretary-General expressed concern that “a disturbing groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance” was being seen around the world.⁴⁹ Similarly, in its resolution [75/187](#), the General Assembly noted that religious intolerance, discrimination and related violence, as well as negative stereotyping of individuals on the basis of religion or belief, continued to rise around the world. The spread of hate propaganda, in particular when coupled with discriminatory practices, policies or legislation, can fuel identity-based tensions, destabilizing societies and, ultimately, increasing the risk of atrocity crimes.

39. Combating intolerance and the advocacy of identity-based hatred and violence requires States to constructively manage diversity. The General Assembly has recognized that doing so requires raising awareness about different cultures and religions or beliefs; it also requires education in the promotion of tolerance and interreligious, interfaith and intercultural dialogue aimed at promoting a culture of tolerance and respect.⁵⁰ In previous reports, it was suggested that constructively managing diversity required laws and institutions designed to protect individuals and groups against identity-based harassment and abuse, including robust constitutional and legislative protections for human rights.⁵¹ Such protections should include the criminalization of incitement to hatred, discrimination and violence. Particular attention should be paid to tackling intolerance and hate speech in schools and other educational settings, as the experiences of children and young people in these settings can sow seeds of injustice and resentment, thereby increasing a society’s propensity to violence in the long term. Measures designed to combat intolerance and hate are highlighted in the recommendations contained in Assembly resolution [75/187](#), in the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence and in the

⁴⁶ *Human Development Report 2019: Beyond Income, Beyond Averages, Beyond Today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century* (United Nations publication, 2019).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/.

⁴⁹ Available at www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf.

⁵⁰ General Assembly resolution [75/187](#).

⁵¹ [A/73/898-S/2019/463](#), para. 16 (a).

2013 Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.

E. Leverage education for peace

40. As noted in section II, education is important to reducing the vulnerability of children and young people to atrocity crimes, including by lowering their exposure to exploitation and abuse in the short term and enhancing their socioeconomic prospects in the long term. Beyond that, however, education sector actors can play a critical role in building societies that are inclusive, tolerant, respectful of diversity and able to manage conflict. In a recently adopted resolution, the General Assembly underscored the potential of educational measures to promote tolerance and the elimination of negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief.⁵²

41. Both the formal and informal education sectors can be leveraged to promote peace. This can be achieved by developing national curricula that promote an understanding of and respect for cultural, religious, ethnic and gender diversity, and teach a balanced account of history, including in relation to past atrocities. Dedicated peace education can equip students with the knowledge and skills to prevent armed conflict and violence. As laid out in the 2012–2016 Learning for Peace Programme of the United Nations Children’s Fund, outside the formal education sector, “life-skills” and targeted peacebuilding training can equip young people with skills, including in communication and leadership, to lead their communities in combating discrimination and hate and managing conflict.⁵³

F. Pursue accountability for atrocities against and affecting children and young people

42. In previous reports on the responsibility to protect, emphasis was placed on the importance of accountability and redress for past atrocities.⁵⁴ In the present report, the Secretary-General reaffirms once again the importance of accountability as a critical deterrent for future perpetrators of atrocities and as one of the most important tools for prevention.

43. As noted in section III, prospects for achieving accountability in relation to grave violations against children were strengthened by the establishment of the monitoring and reporting mechanism by the Security Council in 2005. However, the pursuit of accountability for crimes against children still faces enormous challenges. The first set of challenges concerns the collection of information at the country level, specifically: a lack of capacities engaged in the collection of the information; a lack of access to areas where violations occur; and a lack of access to certain communities, all of which result in underreporting.

44. The second challenge is that not all States are willing or able to hold perpetrators to account. The commitment by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to prioritize access to justice for children is welcome;⁵⁵ however, there remain too many cases of atrocity crimes involving children and young people in relation to which the Court may lack jurisdiction. Thus, the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of

⁵² General Assembly resolution [75/187](#).

⁵³ UNICEF, *Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy in Conflict-Affected Contexts Programme: UNICEF Programme Report 2012–2016* (2016).

⁵⁴ [A/73/898-S/2019/463](#); and [A/75/863-S/2021/424](#).

⁵⁵ International Criminal Court, Office of the Prosecutor, “Policy on Children”, November 2016.

atrocities by States, including, where possible, through the recognition and exercise of universal jurisdiction and the establishment and operation of international commissions of inquiry, regional fact-finding missions and non-judicial accountability mechanisms, are welcome.

45. The third challenge is that, even where accountability mechanisms – both judicial and non-judicial – do exist, their capacity to pursue accountability for crimes against children is limited. Such mechanisms typically lack child-appropriate investigation, documentation and prosecution strategies, as well as child-competent expertise, and often do not engage sufficiently with families and communities.⁵⁶

46. Children and young people have an important role to play in pursuing accountability. Where they are in place, transitional justice processes afford an opportunity for children and young people to share what happened to them, potentially benefit from reparations and see perpetrators being held to account. Beyond the potential healing benefits for the individuals concerned, engaging children and young people in justice processes can advance public satisfaction with them. This was recognized by the Security Council in its resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#), in which it affirmed that young people should be actively engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation, including with regard to truth-telling and truth-seeking, rebuilding civic trust associated with institutional reforms and ensuring that past crimes cannot be repeated.⁵⁷

G. Put children and young people at the centre of atrocity prevention

47. Lastly, driving forward an agenda to reduce the risk of atrocity crimes and implementing the above priorities requires States to place children and young people at the centre of atrocity prevention in every respect. The imperative to protect children and young people from atrocity crimes should be the core driver for ensuring that these crimes never occur, and every initiative undertaken as part of that effort should protect and promote children's rights. That means that every aspect of atrocity prevention, including planning, financing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, should be guided by principles relating to child rights, in particular those on non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to survival and development and participation.⁵⁸

48. Putting children and young people at the centre of atrocity prevention means recognizing the role that they can play, not only as beneficiaries of interventions, but also as partners in peace. Children and young people have access to social networks and spaces, including digital spaces, that others may not. They are thus uniquely placed to identify and respond to early warnings, flag risks, combat negative stereotypes and promote tolerance and respect. The capabilities of children and young people are, however, yet to be systematically leveraged for peace. As highlighted in the second report of the Secretary-General on youth and peace and security, although progress has been made since the adoption of Security Council resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#), young people continue to be treated too infrequently as key partners for

⁵⁶ Federica D'Alessandra and others, *Advancing Justice for Children: Innovations to Strengthen Accountability for Violations and Crimes Affecting Children in Conflict* (Save the Children and Oxford Programme on International Peace and Security, 2021).

⁵⁷ Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (UNFPA and Peacebuilding Support Office, 2018).

⁵⁸ In that connection, attention is drawn to the recommendations of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights regarding a child rights-focused implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, most of which are equally pertinent to atrocity prevention ([A/HRC/34/27](#)).

peace.⁵⁹ Strategies for leveraging the transformative potential of young people identified by the Council in its resolutions on youth, peace and security include investing in the capacity, agency and leadership of young people; transforming the systems that reinforce exclusion to address the structural barriers limiting youth participation in peace and security; and prioritizing partnerships and collaborative action in which young people are viewed as equal and essential partners for peace.⁶⁰ The inclusion of child protection concerns in mediation and peace negotiation is essential.⁶¹ States would benefit from considering additional steps they could take in their own contexts to engage children and young people more proactively in their efforts to reduce the risk of atrocities.

V. Conclusion and recommendations

49. The persisting disproportionate vulnerability of children and young people to, and perpetration against them of, atrocities against them call into question the unanimously endorsed commitment by States to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Children and young people should be at the very heart of, and the impetus for, our efforts to prevent those crimes.

50. Prevention is indeed the key to guaranteeing the safety of children and young people from atrocity crimes. In this respect, the fundamental importance of national ownership by governments cannot be emphasized enough. Moreover, the responsibility to protect children and young people from atrocity crimes, in particular through the seven priority actions that are set out in the present report, would benefit from being conceptualized and institutionalized as a whole-of-government concern involving all levels of government, from the highest levels of political leadership to local authorities. I therefore call on States to:

(a) Ensure that systems are in place at the national level to monitor and respond to early warnings of atrocity crimes, that such systems be designed to collect and analyse gender- and age-specific data and that children and young people be involved in those processes;

(b) Join and implement international and regional legal instruments relevant to the protection of children and young people and cooperate with the mechanisms established to facilitate compliance with those instruments;

(c) Promote socioeconomic equality by adopting laws, policies, plans and budgets to ensure that everyone is fully able to participate in economic, social and political life, regardless of ethnicity, culture, religion, race or gender;

(d) Address identity-based intolerance and hate speech, including through robust constitutional and legislative protections for human rights;

(e) Leverage the formal and informal education sector to build societies that are tolerant and respectful of diversity and able to resolve conflict at the local level;

(f) Ensure that perpetrators of atrocities against children and young people are held to account, including by adopting and implementing legislation criminalizing violations of rules of international law pertaining to the protection of children in armed conflict, adopting national accountability measures, and ensuring that all

⁵⁹ S/2022/220.

⁶⁰ Security Council resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2020).

⁶¹ *Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict* (United Nations publication, 2020).

accountability mechanisms have the necessary expertise to investigate, document and prosecute and adjudicate crimes against children;

(g) Put children and young people at the centre of efforts to prevent atrocities, including by respecting principles relating to child rights and leveraging the capacities of children and young people, and ensure that young people, in particular young women and girls, are fully and meaningfully included in mediation and preventive efforts and at all stages of relevant policy and programmatic intervention;

(h) Strengthen child protection capacities – as should regional and subregional organizations – and engage with the United Nations to improve analysis, develop strategies to prevent grave violations and foster partnerships on child protection.

51. In implementing those priorities, Governments will require the sustained support and engagement of multiple stakeholders. These include:

(a) The support, partnership and expertise of young people, as well as that of civil society more broadly, in particular civil society organizations engaging with children and young people;

(b) Support from multilateral and bilateral State and institutional partners, international financial institutions and the private sector, all of whom are encouraged to give due consideration to the priorities identified in the present report;

(c) Support from organizations and institutions collecting data on situation-specific risk factors of atrocity crimes and sharing good practices;

(d) Support from funds, programmes and specialized agencies concerned and from dedicated or cross-cutting agendas and initiatives of the United Nations.

52. While the responsibility to protect children and young people within their own borders lies first and foremost with national Governments, I would like to reiterate the need for national, regional and multilateral institutions to support the meaningful participation of young women and men at all phases of political and peace processes aimed at preventing atrocities and ensuring sustainable peace. I also stress the responsibility of the international community to support national Governments in pursuing those priorities as part of the responsibility to help States to build their capacity to protect their populations, as articulated in the World Summit Outcome resolution and elaborated on in my 2009 implementation strategy. I further reaffirm the importance of all three pillars of the responsibility to protect outlined in that strategy.