

Children's rights and the UN SDGs

A priority for EU external action

SUMMARY

The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for sustainable development includes a strong commitment by all states to respect human rights, in line with international law and other relevant international documents, in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This covers the rights of the child as enshrined mainly in the UN Covenant on the Rights of the Child and other relevant human rights treaties. No action to implement the SDGs can be detrimental to the rights of the child.

More than a normative framework guiding the implementation of the SDGs, the rights of the child are a fundamental enabling factor for sustainable development and vice versa. Healthy, well-nourished, well-educated children, who are protected from violence and abuse, are the best guarantee of long-term sustainable development. On the other hand, the rights of the child can only be realised in an appropriate environment – peaceful, prosperous, protective of the child and fostering human development. Thus, there is a natural convergence between the SDGs and specific children's rights.

The SDGs, through the comprehensive and regular monitoring they put in place, provide an opportunity for an assessment of the state of the most fundamental rights of the child, as enshrined in the Covenant. Most recent data actually warn that many relevant SDGs may not be achieved by 2030. While progress has been steady in certain areas, particularly on health-related issues, in others, progress has been less conclusive.

The EU prioritises children's rights and relevant SDGs in its external action. It aims at mainstreaming human rights including children's rights in its development assistance to connect the normative and developmental dimensions. The European Parliament has repeatedly defended the need to protect and promote children's rights through EU external action, and has asked the Commission to propose a strategy and action plan in this sense.



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Background: Human rights and SDGs

Human rights have been a source of inspiration, and constitute a guiding framework, for the SDGs. The [UN Resolution on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) emphasises the tight connection between internationally recognised human rights and the SDGs. The Preamble to the Agenda asserts that the 17 SDGs 'seek to realize the human rights of all'. UN states express their commitment 'to protect human rights'. The 2030 Agenda refers to the international human rights as a guiding framework: 'The new Agenda is guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, including full respect for international law. It is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in international human rights treaties'. The implementation of the SDGs therefore has to respect internationally recognised human rights, including the rights of the child. These are enshrined in international law, mainly the [UN Covenant on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) adopted 30 years ago, in the Universal Declaration, as well as in the two core international covenants on human rights - the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (in particular in its Articles 23 and 24), and the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (in particular in article 10).

Rights of the child and the SDGs

By their nature, international children's rights and SDGs have different purposes and scope. The UNCRC imposes legal obligations on the states parties to respect, protect, and fulfil to the greatest extent possible the rights of the child. The SDGs on the other hand include jointly established priorities for the international community of a more concrete and practical nature, linked to measurable objectives. Various [commentators](#) have highlighted that investing in child development is instrumental for realising the SDGs in the long term: 'Children are the future workforce and future consumers, inventors, advocates, and guardians of our world. They must be fully equipped not only to harness the opportunities but also to meet the immense challenges that we collectively face ... Children and young people are not just passive recipients of development aid ... they grow into agents of change that make our world better'.

Competent UN bodies emphasise the interdependence between the fulfilment of children's rights and the achievement of SDGs. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([UN-HCHR](#)), 'the realization of children's rights is the foundation for securing a sustainable future and realizing all human rights'. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (the UN body charged with overseeing the implementation of UNCRC), in its [contribution to the 2019 HLG](#),¹ highlights that the children's rights and sustainable development presuppose and reinforce each other: 'Development can constitute an enabler for children's enjoyment of their rights by providing them with a safe and healthy environment. Integrating a child rights perspective and ensuring the participation of children as active agents of change in decisions relating to development is crucial for achieving inclusive, equitable and sustainable development'. The UN Children's Fund (Unicef) defends a [similar view](#): 'children's rights cannot be realized without the successful implementation of the SDGs and vice versa'. The 2017 Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [Protection of the rights of the child in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) underlines the need to integrate children's rights into the implementation of all SDGs, since they are all directly or indirectly relevant for children's wellbeing and human development:

'All Sustainable Development Goals and targets must be implemented in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the general comments and recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child relevant to each Goal and target area.⁷ While not all of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets refer to children, they are all relevant to children's wellbeing, the fulfilment of their potential and the protection and realization of their human rights. For example, bringing about free primary and secondary education for all children relies upon access to safe water and sanitation facilities, and requires environments that are safe and free from violence against children. Adequate investment in health and education services can be dependent on combating corruption to ensure that sufficient domestic resources are available. Similarly, ensuring that children

survive and grow up in good health relies upon adequate air quality and on other basic needs, which are undermined by the impacts of climate change.'

The UN-HCHR report identifies several priorities for aligning the SDGs' implementation with the rights of the child: **ending violence, exploitation and abuse of children**, and **fighting gender equality** (in line with the general comment No 13 (2011) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child); **addressing childhood poverty** ('as it is damaging to development outcomes and can lead to the lifelong denial of multiple rights'); implementing Goal 3 commitments on **Health and nutrition** in accordance with Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and related general comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child; and implementing targets relating to **education** in accordance with the principle of equal opportunity under article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with a particular focus on providing girls' access to secondary education. The final recommendations of the report include:

- the protection of children's rights must take precedence in respect of all aspects of national planning, implementation and the monitoring and review process for the 2030 Agenda;
- a universal, integrated approach is needed to implement the 2030 Agenda in a manner consistent with the rights of the child, recognising the relevance of each of its 17 Goals to all children in all countries;
- delivering on the pledge that no one will be left behind and those furthest behind will be reached first;
- children's rights must be integrated as a core consideration in all programmes, policies and frameworks aimed at achieving the 2030 Agenda;
- children's participation is crucial throughout the implementation and follow-up;
- a human rights approach is needed for data collection and monitoring.

State of implementation of child-related SDGs

Both the [UN 2019 Sustainable Development Goals Report](#) and the Unicef² first comprehensive assessment on progress towards achieving the global SDG targets for children, [Progress for Every Child in the SDG Era](#), paint a sobering picture concerning the achievement of targets related to children. According to Unicef, almost a billion children live in countries where the SDGs remain out of reach. On average, 75 per cent of child-related SDG indicators³ in every country either show insufficient progress to meet global SDG targets by 2030, or lack adequate data.

According to the UN report, poverty affects children disproportionately, with one in five children living in extreme poverty. Since 2000, the proportion of children suffering from chronic and acute under-nutrition has been declining. Nevertheless, 149 million children under 5 years old, or 22 % of all children under 5 in the world, were still chronically under-nourished in 2018, with the highest proportion in southern Asia (39 %) and sub-Saharan Africa (36 %). The number of children under 5 suffering from acute under-nutrition, or wasting (low weight for height) in 2018 was lower, at 49 million children or 7.3 % globally.

The health sector provides more promising data: remarkable progress has been made in child survival worldwide, and millions of children under five are more likely to survive today than in 2000. The under-5 mortality rate has fallen by 49 %. However, progress needs to accelerate in about 50 countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, to meet the target by 2030. This would save the lives of an additional 10 million children under 5 years old.

Regarding education, globally, more than 55 % of children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age lacked minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics in 2015. Nearly one fifth of children and adolescents (6 to 17 years old) in the world were out of school, and progress in reaching out-of-school children has stalled.

Another harmful practice, [child marriage](#), has continued to decline around the world, largely driven by progress in southern Asia. There, a girl's risk of marrying in childhood has decreased by over 40 % since 2000. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, the practice has declined at a slower pace.

In sub-Saharan Africa, fewer than half (46 %) of all children under 5 years of age are registered at birth. Birth registration is both a right under the UNCRC (article 7) and a target of SDG 16.

The 2019 [report](#) of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children draws attention to the fact that every year, at least one billion children – half of the world's children – experience violence, and three in every four children under the age of five experience violent discipline at the hands of caregivers, despite significant progress in many countries in adopting comprehensive policies and legislation to ban violence against children in all its forms. The main challenge however remains the implementation of these legal and policy frameworks. According to the same report, '[The adoption of target 16.2 by the United Nations] is a historic breakthrough and provides unique momentum for an unstoppable movement to bring such violence to an end'.

Children in armed conflict

Particularly grave violations of children's rights result from the involvement of children in armed conflict, as well as from violence that is inflicted on children in the context of armed conflict. The [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict](#) aims at protecting children from recruitment and use in hostilities. Adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 May 2000, the Protocol has been ratified by 168 countries. Children are affected by conflicts in many ways that go beyond conscription as child soldiers. They are killed or maimed as civilian victims of combat, or they [suffer sexual violence](#) and enslavement. The SDGs include two targets that are relevant in this context. Target 8.7 aims to eradicate all recruitment and use of child soldiers, while target 16.2 focuses on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

The picture painted by the [latest yearly report of the UN Secretary-General, on children in armed conflict in 2018](#) is bleak: 'The year 2018 was marked by the highest levels of children killed or maimed in armed conflict since the United Nations started monitoring and reporting this grave violation'. More than 12 000 children were killed or maimed in conflict settings, including through cross-fire, land mines or improvised explosive devices. 7 000 children were recruited and used as soldiers on the frontline. Sexual violence against children is prevalent in conflict situations such as Somalia and Democratic Republic of Congo, but remains largely under-reported. Many children have been deprived of access to school because of conflict, e.g. in Mali where numerous schools had to close under threats from fundamentalists.

EU external policies implementing children's rights and SDGs

EU external policies, including EU development assistance, recognise the tight link and mutual interdependence between human and children's rights, and the SDGs, and aim at embedding them in the implementation of all EU measures.

The 2017 [European Consensus on Development](#) outlines a common vision for the EU and its Member States on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in partnership with all developing countries. It includes an explicit commitment to mainstream human rights in all development actions under the SDG framework. The EU and its Member States commit to implementing a rights-based approach to development cooperation, encompassing all human rights, ensuring that no-one is left behind, regardless of age. The Consensus includes a range of priorities for EU and Member State action, which are related to SDG targets referring to children, such as ending hunger and ensuring food security and adequate nutrition, reducing child and maternal mortality, supporting inclusive lifelong learning and equitable quality education, particularly during early childhood and primary years, ending child marriage, combating child labour, improving the protection of children and their participation in decisions that concern them. These are also crucial for realising many of the rights of the child.

The [EU action plan on human rights and democracy \(2015-2019\)](#), adopted in July 2015, outlines a number of actions relating to children, to be conducted in EU external policies, that are also relevant for SDG targets, such as:

- help to strengthen third countries' child protection systems, to protect children from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect;
- targeting the protection of physical and psychological integrity of women and girls through activities which help protect women's human rights and ensure freedom from violence, paying special attention to ending female genital mutilation (FGM), early and forced child marriage, and gender based and sexual violence in conflict;
- promoting the right to education, health and nutrition, social protection and the fight against the worst forms of child labour;
- programmes for children affected by armed conflict.

In 2007, the Council of the EU adopted a set of policy recommendations for integrating children's rights concerns in EU external action, known as the [EU Guidelines on Children's Rights](#). The guidelines, which were revised in March 2017, aim at 'leaving no child behind', in line with the central tenet of Agenda 2030. One of the priorities defined therein is to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with a particular focus on the goals and targets most relevant for children.

Another set of guidelines, [EU guidelines on children and armed conflict](#) (updated in 2008), aim to end the recruitment of children into armed forces, by working together with third-country governments. According to the guidelines, all EU conflict-related measures should take children into account at all stages: in early-warning and preventive approaches, as well as in actual conflict situations, peace negotiations, peace agreements, and in post-conflict justice measures.

In order to streamline children's rights in all development cooperation, and particularly in areas where child action is less typical, such as infrastructure, governance and budget reform, but which nevertheless have an impact on children's rights, the EU and Unicef have developed [a toolkit](#) targeted at development professionals. This contains more than 80 innovative and practical tools and guidance about how to consider and reflect children's rights in programming, budgeting, policy and law-making.

EU [development assistance](#) has made a tangible difference to fulfilling the rights of the child, and achieving the relevant SDGs. In 2016, almost 1.5 million women and children received nutrition support through EU aid. Between mid-2016 and mid-2017, over 12 million children were enrolled in primary education, and 3.3 million in secondary education, thanks to EU aid, while over 3 million births were attended by skilled health personnel, reducing maternal mortality.

European Parliament recommendations

During the 2014-2019 term, the European Parliament adopted several resolutions that addressed children's rights. In its [resolution](#) of October 2017 on ending child marriage, the Parliament emphasised that child marriage is a violation of the rights of the child and a form of violence against women and girls, which needs to be condemned. It further called on the EU High Representative to make use of all the instruments available to address this practice. In a [resolution](#) of November 2018 on EU development assistance in the field of education, Parliament stated its conviction that education aid must be a priority, because education is essential for the achievement of the other SDGs. It recognised that achieving SDG 4 calls for massive investment in education systems and therefore proposed that the Union and its Member States devote 10 % of their official development assistance (ODA) to education by 2024, and 15 % by 2030. It further called for at least 40 % of education aid from the EU and Member States to be channelled to the least developed countries.

Parliament also insisted repeatedly on the need to better integrate children's rights into EU external policies. A European Parliament [resolution](#) of 27 November 2014 on the 25th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, called on the VP/HR and on the Commission to mainstream children's rights in EU external policies. In its annual reports on human rights and democracy in the world and the EU policy on the matter for [2014](#) and [2016](#), the Parliament asked the Commission to propose a comprehensive child rights strategy

and action plan, in order to prioritise children's rights within EU external policies. In the 2014 resolution, it also asked the VP/HR to report annually to Parliament on the results achieved with regard to child-focused EU external actions. In its annual report on human rights and democracy in the world 2017 and the European Union's policy on the matter for [2017](#), the Parliament suggested that the EU should unilaterally accede to the UNCRC, and highlighted the need that EU policies reach all children, including the most marginalised and those in vulnerable situations.

MAIN REFERENCES

[List of resources](#), Unicef.

[Protection of the rights of the child in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) has met twice in 2019, for the first time since the adoption of the SDGs: 1) during its regular annual meeting under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc) in July, and 2) for the first time at the General Assembly (which occurs every four years) in September. At the July HLPF, the overarching theme was 'Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality'.
- ² Unicef is the custodian or co-custodian agency for [17](#) child related SDG indicators and plays a supporting role for other indicators.
- ³ The 2030 Agenda mandated the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) to define global indicators for tracking the SDG goals and targets. The official list of global SDG indicators was approved by the Statistical Commission in March 2017, and subsequently adopted by the General Assembly in July 2017. (see <https://www.unicef.org/media/60136/file>)

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Annex – Linking SDGs with the rights provided in the UNCRC

SDG targets referring explicitly to children*	Examples of relevant UNCRC articles
1.2 By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions	<p>Article 6.2 States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child</p> <p>Article 27.1 States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.</p>
<p>2.1 End hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round</p> <p>2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons</p>	<p>Article 6.1 States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life</p> <p>2. States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child</p> <p>Article 24.2 States Parties shall pursue full implementation of this right and, in particular, shall take appropriate measures:</p> <p>(a) To diminish infant and child mortality;</p> <p>(b) To ensure the provision of necessary medical assistance and health care to all children with emphasis on the development of primary health care;</p> <p>(c) To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology and through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution;</p>
3.2 By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1 000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1 000 live births	<p>(a) To diminish infant and child mortality;</p> <p>(b) To ensure the provision of necessary medical assistance and health care to all children with emphasis on the development of primary health care;</p> <p>(c) To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology and through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution;</p>
4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	<p>Article 28.1 States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:</p> <p>(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;</p> <p>(b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;</p>
4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education	<p>Article 18.3 children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible</p>
4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations	<p>Article 2.1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.</p>
4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all	<p>Article 23.1. States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.</p> <p>...</p>

<p>5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation</p>	<p>Article 24.3 States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.</p>
<p>8.7 Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms</p>	<p>Article 32 1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.</p> <p>Article 34 States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. For these purposes, States Parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent:</p> <p>Article 35</p> <p>States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form.</p> <p>Article 36</p> <p>States Parties shall protect the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare.</p>
<p>11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons</p>	<p>Article 23 States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions, which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community</p>
<p>11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities</p>	<p>Article 31.1 States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.</p>
<p>16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children</p>	<p>Article 19.1 States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.</p> <p>Article 37 States Parties shall ensure that:</p> <p>(a) No child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below eighteen years of age;</p>

* This table provides a brief overview of convergence between the two sets of tools and does not intend to be comprehensive either with respect to the SDGs that target children directly or indirectly, or with respect to the UNCRC articles which can put in relation with these SDGs. Unicef has conducted a [comprehensive mapping exercise](#) putting all SDGs in relation with UNCRC articles. The EU's revised [Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child](#) also include a more comprehensive list of SDGs that are considered relevant for the rights of the child in an annex.

Source: [UN SDGs](#), [UNCRC](#), [Unicef](#), [EU Guidelines on the Rights of the Child](#)