Children's Involvement in Organized Violence: Emerging trends and knowledge gaps

Based on evidence from different fields and areas of expertise

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Contents

I. Children in the global polycrisis: Increasing risks of their participation in organized violence?

What is the definition and scope of the problem? What is on the horizon?

Throughout much of history, organizations have used violence as a political weapon, exploited it for criminal gain and leveraged it for social change. Children's involvement in organized violence has persisted equally as long. They have been used and exploited by a range of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and national armed forces to take part in combat, to commit other forms of violence in the context of armed conflict and to fulfil other purposes. They have also become members of organized criminal groups and, more recently, have been targeted by online networks that promote violence for all manner of causes.

What is organized violence?

This working paper uses the term 'organized violence' to refer to "the intentional use of physical force, threatened or actual, against another person or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. This violent act is committed by a member of a group of three or more people at any time with a common purpose and knowledge violence will be used to pursue it."[1]

For the purposes of this paper, only armed non-state actors are considered. In the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF's) programme and policy work, 'armed non-state actors' is used as a broad term that covers all armed groups operating in conflict and non-conflict situations. UNICEF then analyses these groups and places them in a typology based on a set of organizational and contextual characteristics. This working paper and a closed-door round table that preceded it (see Section II below), however, drew on the information and expertise of publications and experts that focus on more delineated subdivisions of armed non-state actors. The purpose of the round table was to bring these communities of experts together to share their insights on the involvement of children in these armed non-state actors, to document emerging commonalities and differences, and to identify areas for future foresight analysis and research. This working paper therefore includes three subsets of violent actors:

▸ **NSAGs** in armed conflict situations, including those who are designated or otherwise labelled as insurgents, terrorists and violent extremists and who usually operate in situations of armed conflict.[2]
▸ **Organized criminal groups**, including street gangs and organizations that traffic in arms, drugs or people. These groups are not typically parties to armed conflict, even though some will be operating in places affected by conflict.[3]
▸ Emerging loose **networks** that may have an online-only or hybrid online/offline presence, an unclear leadership hierarchy and limited rules. These are sometimes referred to as 'post-organizational' groups.[4]

These three subcategories are not mutually exclusive. Some violent groups, for example, may be simultaneously engaged in combat against a government while producing narcotics and loosely coordinating with other branches of the group through social media applications.

The vulnerability of children to involvement in organized violence may be getting more complex, or at least may be changing. The world is facing a confluence of multiple global shocks that have cascaded to affect and amplify each other.[5] While most countries were still recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a war in Ukraine which began in 2014 greatly escalated, exacerbating global inflation, energy shortfalls and food insecurity. The latest intensification of hostilities in Israel and the State of Palestine has led to further volatility in the Middle East. Other countries in which conflict has erupted or intensified since 2019 include Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Myanmar and the Sudan. Meanwhile, the long-term challenge of climate change continues unabated. This convergence of global shocks – sometimes called a 'global polycrisis' – has had many harmful effects, some of which may present more serious risks to children. This global dynamic has created or exacerbated a number of conditions which affect children and families locally, including economic hardship, rising political tension, anger towards and fear of migrants, frustration with climate insecurity, and the use of new weapons in conflicts that might eventually spread to other crises. All of these conditions have the potential to amplify tensions that may lead to organized violence. In many cases, these shocks have also taken place in contexts with weak governance and inadequate systems to protect children and their rights, further increasing vulnerabilities.

This global context is, furthermore, marked by a diversification and fragmentation of armed actors that pursue old and new causes while choosing to organize and operate in different ways. Some of these armed groups hold territory and challenge the state over governance. The Islamic State achieved this briefly in some locations in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. Meanwhile, armed groups in Haiti and, until recently, El Salvador have continued to pose challenges to governments in particular neighbourhoods or provinces. In Afghanistan, the Taliban, a former NSAG, removed the government and took control of the country, though it is now battling an Islamic State-linked armed group itself. Territorial control can be important to group identity.[6] Some armed groups rely on a networked 'franchise' structure, calling for different affiliated groups to form, pursue a common cause and launch attacks when advantageous but without coming under a central chain of command. Still others may orchestrate attacks while hiding among local communities or in the anonymity of the online world. Groups in the latter category may pursue this less structured type of organization when they are dispersed, unable to mobilize and hold territory, or uninterested in challenging the government for control. Some groups, including right-wing groups and the Islamic State, have declared this to be a particular strategy in their area of operation.[7]

The children involved in organized violence themselves are members of a significant new generation, Generation Z. In many countries, they are the first generation to have been born into and to have grown up in a digital world. They are also a generation that is struggling with increased mental health challenges. They must grapple with misinformation and disinformation in a 'post-truth' era, as well as the effects of algorithmic echo chambers that amplify opinions and trends. For some, engagement in digital realms enables greater social interaction, free from stigma or preconceptions. For others, however, the predominance of digital over in-person social interaction could lead to increased isolation and loneliness, feelings compounded by pandemic-driven lockdowns.[8] Generation Alpha – people born from 2014 onwards – are the next group that could be drawn into organized violence, though how they will develop during their adolescence and what influences will predominate remains a matter of discussion.

The involvement of children in acts of violence does not usually happen overnight. The diversity of individual trajectories suggests that it is necessary to understand the various manifestations of the phenomenon, from children demonstrating curiosity about ideas to their committing a violent act.[9] In addition, children's engagement with violent groups or participation in violent acts is often not preceded by their accepting or adhering to an ideology.[10] We must explore how these situations of child involvement in organized violence unfold through various pathways.

II. A new approach

How can we approach the issue in a new way? What questions and evidence should we be surveying? What is on the horizon and how do we need to prepare for this?
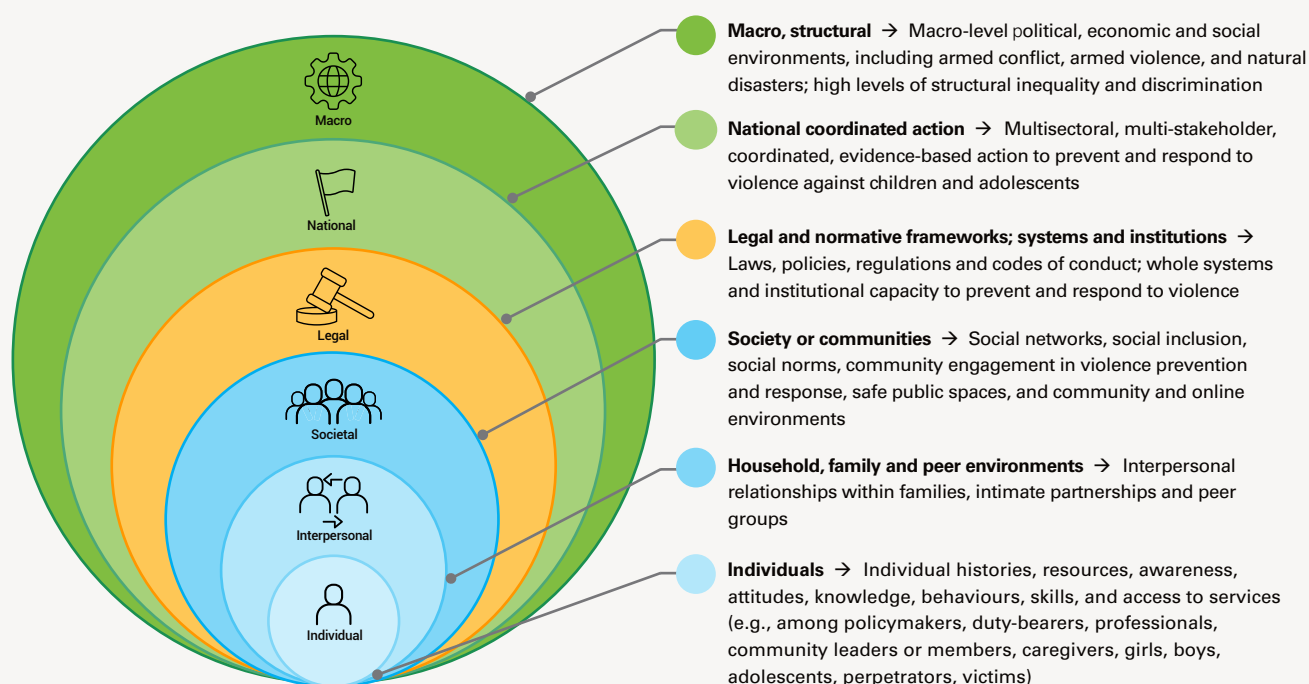
The purpose of this working paper is to begin to understand current and emerging trends by drawing on evidence from different fields and areas of expertise. Children's involvement in organized violence remains a serious problem that could continue to grow in the context of multiple global crises and innovation. However, current efforts to address this problem are often pursued through silos. They may focus on the type of violent organization that is recruiting children and/or on applicable international and domestic law, especially laws that determine whether a situation can be designated an international armed conflict. This working paper therefore also seeks to deepen understanding of where the commonalities and differences lie in child involvement in organized violence. This, in turn, may facilitate the development of a common analytical framework that encompasses the different contexts in which the phenomenon occurs.

This working paper was developed by UNICEF through an iterative process of literature review and consultation. The initial draft was prepared using a rapid review of academic and grey literature in a compressed period and does not therefore represent a systematic literature review of the state of knowledge. The paper was used to organize discussions at an expert round table held at the UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight in Florence, Italy, which involved more than 20 experts from a range of fields and areas of country expertise. The current version of this paper was further updated following the round table.

The paper is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which sets out the rights of children, including in situations of armed violence, although important gaps in interpretation remain. Such gaps can pose challenges in addressing child involvement in organized violence. One example is the disparity in the attention given to adolescent children (10–18 years). Because domestic security law and programmes often include them in the category of 'youth', these older children can be treated as adults, with no specialized policy or guidelines. Yet children in this age group have the same rights as children under 10 – even if they require special considerations and age-appropriate policies and approaches to protect them – and their age in no way justifies derogation from the convention.

While steps have been taken to safeguard the rights of adolescents, more work is needed. The CRC's general comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence identifies many risks and challenges for adolescents involved in organized violence and calls for broad action to prevent this and reintegrate children. However, these guidelines need to be further unpacked for operational purposes. The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict is an important tool for addressing recruitment and use of children by NSAGs and government armed forces, but it does not directly address children's involvement in armed groups in situations below the threshold of armed conflict. Stronger actions are therefore needed to further realize the rights of children who are part of these groups or at risk of joining them.

Figure 1: Socio-ecological model for understanding violence against children

Macro, structural → Macro-level political, economic and social environments, including armed conflict, armed violence, and natural disasters; high levels of structural inequality and discrimination

National coordinated action → Multisectoral, multi-stakeholder, coordinated, evidence-based action to prevent and respond to violence against children and adolescents

Legal and normative frameworks; systems and institutions → Laws, policies, regulations and codes of conduct; whole systems and institutional capacity to prevent and respond to violence

Society or communities → Social networks, social inclusion, social norms, community engagement in violence prevention and response, safe public spaces, and community and online environments

Household, family and peer environments → Interpersonal relationships within families, intimate partnerships and peer groups

Individuals → Individual histories, resources, awareness, attitudes, knowledge, behaviours, skills, and access to services (e.g., among policymakers, duty-bearers, professionals, community leaders or members, caregivers, girls, boys, adolescents, perpetrators, victims)

Source: Adapted from Guerrero, Gabriela and Vanessa Rojas, 'Understanding Children's Experiences of Violence in Peru: Evidence from young lives', *Innocenti Working Paper* 2016–17, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence, 2016, p.14.

This paper employs a socio-ecological child protection analytical framework.[11] This model is based on a concept sometimes known as the child's 'protective environment', which views the child as having agency while also being shielded by various layers of actors (*see Figure 1*). Family, peers, community, institutions or organizations, government systems and broader structural issues all have important roles in reinforcing child resilience or, where they are weak, exposing the child to harm. These layers are interconnected, with action on one layer potentially affecting other layers and the child. The child, too, has a degree of agency to affect the various layers. However, this complex interplay between the levels is not yet well understood and research is needed to clarify the dynamic with children's involvement in organized violence.

III. Vulnerabilities in children's protective environment

How are children becoming involved in organized violence? What factors are driving this phenomenon?

There is no single way to explain or predict the involvement of children with NSAGs, organized criminal groups and networks, or the risk of them participating in acts of organized violence. Many factors have been identified as relevant and are common across the

different trends. Often, these factors are clustered analytically in the socio-ecological model, which includes the individual child; family, peers, and community; organizations; governments; and broader structural contextual factors. For example, a systematic review of studies of a single predictor or correlate associated with gang membership in low- and middle-income countries found 15 factors that were significantly associated with gang membership.[12] Many of these same factors feature in the literature on child recruitment into NSAGs in conflict situations, including those that may be labelled 'violent extremist' or 'terrorist'.[13]

A recurring theme that emerges from a review of these factors is that of 'cumulative risk'. This suggests that children accumulate different risks until they reach a tipping point, where they become significantly more likely to join a violent group and participate in violence.[14] The relative contributions of these various factors often differ for each individual child, however. The complexity of this phenomenon therefore requires a multidisciplinary analysis. It also requires an understanding of different drivers at play in particular contexts and the specific combination of vulnerabilities and risk factors faced by individual children across and between the levels of the socio-ecological model.[15]
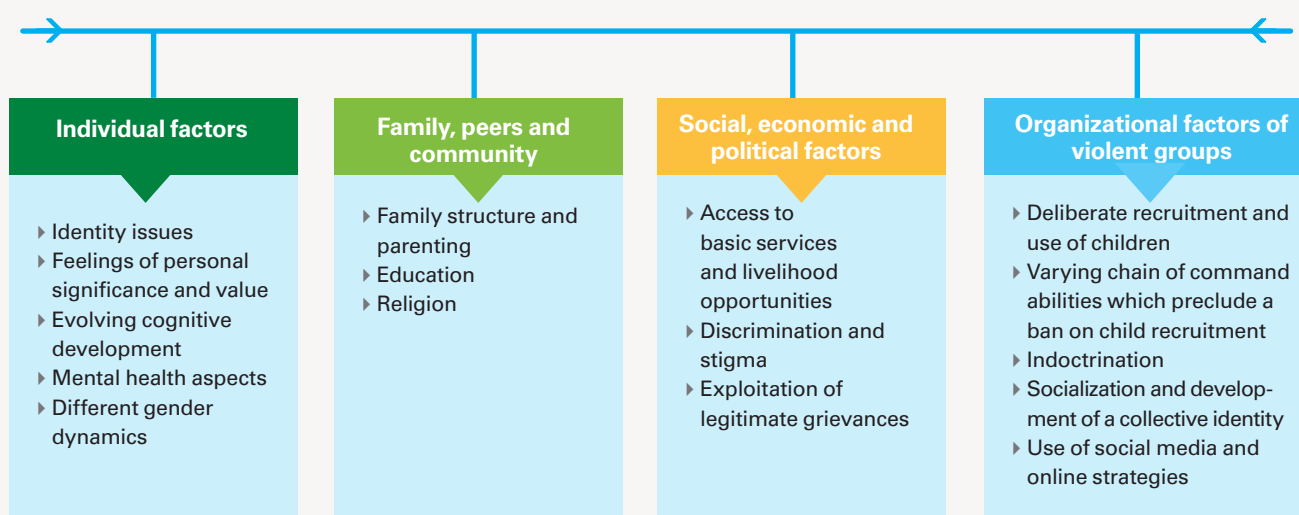
The following sections begin to unpack some of the factors within the socio-ecological framework that affect children and their decision-making. These include factors which are particularly critical for the new generation of children and which may not have had the same impact on previous generations.

1. Individual factors

Child development, personality traits and mental health have been highlighted as some of the variables that render children vulnerable to persuasion, coercion and recruitment by violent groups. This is an area in which learning is ongoing.[16]

Identity confusion and self-doubt are common in adolescence. Collective identities play an important role in creating a sense of stability and belonging. Children are building their own

Figure 2: **Vulnerabilities in children's protective environment**

Individual factors	Family, peers and community	Social, economic and political factors	Organizational factors of violent groups
▸ Identity issues ▸ Feelings of personal significance and value ▸ Evolving cognitive development ▸ Mental health aspects ▸ Different gender dynamics	▸ Family structure and parenting ▸ Education ▸ Religion	▸ Access to basic services and livelihood opportunities ▸ Discrimination and stigma ▸ Exploitation of legitimate grievances	▸ Deliberate recruitment and use of children ▸ Varying chain of command abilities which preclude a ban on child recruitment ▸ Indoctrination ▸ Socialization and development of a collective identity ▸ Use of social media and online strategies

identities separate from their parents or caregivers. Some adolescents may decide to join an NSAG or organized criminal group to empower themselves and/or to rebel against their family or society at large.[17] Some children may see adhering to an ideology or joining a violent group as a way to recover a lost identity or construct a new one.[18] This may be especially true when positive role models and other prosocial sources of collective identity[19] – such as sports teams, clubs, religious groups and other social groups – are unavailable or unappealing. This is reflected in survey data gathered from apprehended and detained members of NSAGs imprisoned in the Philippines, Sri Lanka and the United States of America, with an average age of 32 years. Although these surveys were not restricted to child respondents, they showed that these groups and their related ideologies appealed to individuals who felt ashamed or humiliated by society by promising to restore their image and end uncertainty.[20]

Feelings of personal significance and value are critical to building a positive self-image. Perceived injustice or a sense of unworthiness could therefore lead to an association with violent groups.[21] Some studies have identified 'radical' ideas as one pathway that may offer individuals the possibility of belonging and acceptance when they experience conflict between the family and society at large, including instances of humiliation and injustice.[22] While linked closely to society, cultural values of honour, dignity and 'face' are also important among some communities, which may see the use of violence as a legitimate recourse to protecting those values.[23] The "culture of martyrdom" can also be strongly linked to these values and may be amplified by violent groups that wish to recruit children.[24]

Cognitive development can also affect children's desire to participate in organized violence. Adolescents are particularly open to greater risk-taking and those with a neurologically elevated need for reward (or 'reward drive') may be even more so.[25] Other cognitive factors can stem from the child's environment. For example, it has been suggested that rote learning, which continues to be practised in some countries, contributes to a binary way of thinking, whereby there is only right and wrong. This may make it more challenging for children to engage in reasoning and critical thinking or appreciate multiple views on a topic.[26] These children may then be attracted to groups that claim to be fighting an existential battle between good and evil. They may also find it difficult to differentiate adequately between helpful and harmful groups.

There is mixed evidence on the relationship between mental health challenges and a child's decision to associate with an NSAG, organized criminal group or violent network and commit acts of violence. Depression has been identified among some adolescents involved in NSAGs, although not always through a formal diagnosis.[27] Some argue that depression could work as a push factor because by adhering to a belief, the individual can fight negative emotions and externalize conflict.[28] A study with adolescents and young people aged 16 to 25 in Canada concluded that depression was associated with higher levels of sympathy for violent ideologies.[29] At the same time, some scholars are concerned that a focus on mental disorders could "pathologize extremism" and thus limit the understanding of this topic.[30] Indeed, adolescents' involvement with organized violence is not always directly related to specific disorders[31] or psychiatric pathologies.[32] Studies of European adolescents show that only a small minority of the individuals (adolescents or adults) who adhere to these ideologies present a psychiatric disorder that would alter their perception of reality.[33] Mental health conditions may also share common risk factors with association with organized violence (for example, family environment, community violence and structural barriers).

Research also recognizes different pathways and motivations when comparing boys' and girls' participation in violent groups, although more evidence is needed.[34] Gender clearly intersects with different vulnerabilities at different levels. While a majority of fighters in NSAGs are male, many groups have deployed girls and young women as fighters, including to detonate body-borne bombs. Girls have also been recruited or abducted for other tasks, including to be forcibly married to male fighters and to attract more boys and men to the group.[35] A study in France examined a large prospective sample of French adolescents and young people who wished to join the Islamic State between 2014 and 2016 and found a higher percentage of girls compared to boys.[36] For these girls, the main motivating factors were marriage and fascination with men engaged in armed conflict.[37] In other cases, where child marriage is prevalent, joining an armed group could be a means to escape child marriage.[38]

2. Family, peers and community

Family, peers and the community are often the most proximate influences to the child, although the online world of social media and gaming creates new considerations for how close ties are established and become influential. Peer relations are especially important to developing adolescents.

Certain family structures and parental behaviours can render children and adolescents more vulnerable to violent ideas and behaviour.[39] A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report which interviewed more than 2,000 individuals in Africa found that an unhappy childhood and lack of parental involvement were associated with a higher likelihood of voluntary participation in NSAGs.[40] This research also revealed that women and girls were more likely to be recruited into NSAGs via family members than via peers.[41] Another study of more than 60 male youth (mean age = 19.77) in the Sabaoon Centre for Deradicalization and Reintegration in Pakistan found that the fathers of many were working overseas, leaving them unsupervised. Many were also middle sons of large families for whom the family could not afford education and who had few work opportunities.[42] While not directly exploring the involvement of children, a study of 91 former members of US white supremacist groups aged between 19 and 61 years found that 63 per cent had experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences (from maltreatment to household dysfunction).[43] Likewise, in a study in Pakistan, "family members and authority figures within the community played a role in encouraging the youth towards militancy."[44] Similar factors have been shown to influence children's association with organized criminal groups.

Educational opportunity has a key role in reducing vulnerability to violent groups and ideas, although this may depend on the context. In Africa, lack of basic education has been found to affect and accelerate recruitment into NSAGs.[45] The aforementioned UNDP analysis also found that an additional year of schooling reduced the likelihood of voluntary recruitment by 13 per cent.[46] These results were reflected in another study from the Lake Chad Basin which found that formal education reduced the likelihood of association with Boko Haram in Nigeria.[47] However, in some situations, including in Nigeria, schools remain a place where organized criminal groups and NSAGs (including those allied with the government) actively recruit children through peer pressure, persuasion and coercion. The same study of the Lake Chad Basin showed that being at school increased children's risk of being recruited by the Civilian Joint Task Force.

Religion may be a protective factor but can also be interpreted and leveraged to drive child recruitment or to incite violence. A study in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland suggests that religion may have a protective role against 'extremist' ideas and support for armed conflict but could also serve to articulate clear 'enemies'.[48] In sub-Saharan Africa, the UNDP study found that higher levels of religious education and literacy were associated with a lower likelihood of adolescent and youth voluntary recruitment into NSAGs; at the same time, a stronger sense of religious identity could serve as a way to express grievances.[49]

Peer networks are highly predictive of some forms of organized violence involvement and further harm. "[D]elinquent peer networks and negative peer influences are consistent predictors of joining gangs."[50] Having gang members within one's social network is associated with a significantly increased risk of being a victim of violence, even for gang non-members (but especially for members).[51]

3. Social, economic and political factors

Feelings of injustice experienced at an individual level may derive from broader political, social, cultural and economic challenges, including contexts of exclusion and inequality. Poor governance, including lack of access to social services, can be a significant trigger for grievances, as can human rights violations committed by governments themselves, and may push many children and young people to join armed groups. Some theorize that groups perpetrating organized violence display behaviour similar to that of rational economic actors. State violence cannot be overlooked as a reason for children's involvement in violence and needs to be objectively examined.

Adolescents and young people may be unable to cope if they face multiple adversities, including conflict, disasters and lack of access to basic services and livelihood opportunities.[52] Child and family livelihood opportunities can play a powerful role, especially when armed groups and gangs offer a salary or control territory and many facets of the local economy. In Africa, UNDP found that a general sense of economic hardship informed the decisions of individuals voluntarily recruited into a sample of NSAGs, as did a lack of trust in the state, revealing a fractured social contract.[53] A quarter of voluntary recruits, particularly men, chose to join those groups for lack of employment opportunities.[54] In Germany, a sample of more than 6,000 ninth graders found that the highest approval of right-wing statements came from boys with a high sense of relative disadvantage and social deprivation.[55] In Sri Lanka, unemployment, poverty and anger at corrupt practices of government officials were among the main grievances that led youth to join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a former NSAG, according to a survey and focus group discussions conducted with males and females aged mainly between 15 and 29 years. Children also join organized criminal groups to be paid as a 'regular job'.

Discrimination and a perception that the individual's group or identity is at risk could also contribute to the association of children with violent groups. Discrimination across multiple and intersecting spheres of a child's identity – such as ethnicity, religion, poverty, caste, race and gender – is common in many situations in which children become involved in organized violence.[56] The increase in populist and polarizing rhetoric, which is creating divides in societies, may increase group cohesion and foment an attitude of 'us versus them'.[57] Thus, group-targeted interventions can inadvertently

reinforce group boundaries.[58] Children are vulnerable to being associated with a particular group and may face social or legal consequences for either disavowing or acquiescing in the association.[59] Further research may help to clarify to what extent these trends on perceptions and attitudes also hold true for children and how they are acted upon.

NSAGs, organized criminal groups and networks promoting violence may also exploit grievances and connect them with violent ideas as a way for members to find redress.[60] Many experts consider that traditional anti-terrorism approaches or security-focused interventions have led to the stigmatization of Muslim communities and less social cohesion.[61] To recruit new members, Al-Shabaab has exploited the historical mistreatment of Muslims in Kenya as well as the stigmatization of young male Somalis as bandits (*shifta*).[62] A longitudinal study in Canada with representative samples of individuals aged 16 to 25 found that exposure to violence (in relation to a social or political context, personal persecution or violent events involving someone close) was associated with higher support for "violent radicalization".[63] The authors argue that this trend may be related to the "emergence of new forms of youth politicized bullying associated with race, ethnicity and religion" and to increased exposure to violent ideas, including through social media.[64]

It is also important to recognize that some children grow up in incredibly violent contexts. In some places, violence can become normalized. Indeed, it may sometimes be labelled as 'legitimate' because it is committed by state forces – whether in the name of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency or crime suppression. Violence and abuse committed by government security forces and police therefore can be a factor in the recruitment of children and adults alike.

4. Organizational factors: Violent group positions and practice

Not all violent groups use violence from the outset. Some networks or protest groups start with the intention of pursuing non-violent action – and include children in their activities – but for different reasons later incorporate violent tactics when they feel they are having insufficient political impact. Groups may also be seeking a way to influence policy and to be heard when they do not feel they have been listened to at the local level – often a key factor determining people's trust in government. When groups do adopt violence as a tactic, the level of risk to children increases depending on whether they choose to recruit children or otherwise permit the association of children with the group and depending on how much power the group has in the community. According to International Committee of the Red Cross estimates, in 2023, approximately 64 million people were living in areas fully under the control of NSAGs, with another 131 million living in areas where armed groups contested control. This amounts to a staggering 195 million people – more than the population of Bangladesh, the eighth-most-populous country in the world.[65] Clearly, how groups decide to operate has a significant impact on child rights, as does the behaviour of these groups towards children in the community.

Many NSAGs and organized criminal groups recruit and use children for a variety of purposes and perceived benefits. Some see children as expendable – fighters that they can throw into battle with little training and poor equipment. The deployment of children may also be viewed as posing moral and psychological challenges to opposing forces. Others have used children for violence or to carry out crimes because children may receive lighter punishment under the law if captured. Children

may fill a gap as auxiliary forces deployed to spy, act as lookouts, carry messages and undertake other tasks for the group (and may later be used as fighters). Violent acts committed by children may also be displayed for propaganda purposes.[66] Some groups may believe that children should be recruited and trained as the next generation of fighters as part of a longer-term strategy. The Islamic State, for example, reportedly trained children from a young age and may have had a generational approach to its agenda, expecting the fighting to wax and wane over decades.[67] Furthermore, as well as being recruited for different purposes, children may be treated differently within a group based on their identity, gender and age.[68]

Organizational factors play a part in determining whether and how violent groups recruit children. Some violent groups simply do not know what international law says in relation to the protection of children and their rights or are not concerned with either international or domestic law. Others have their own understanding and interpretation of child rights and international law. Alternatively, if they do not recognize secular law as their normative framework, they may interpret religious law or spiritual beliefs in ways that justify or prohibit the use of children to commit acts of violence. Still others will imitate the behaviour of their opponents. As a result, groups have different positions and internal rules on child participation in violence, including on whether they discourage it (based on age and gender) or actively accept and pursue the recruitment of children. This is determined partly by incentives and the group's internal beliefs and code but also by disincentives, such as the community perception and whether laws criminalizing the recruitment of children are in place alongside government capacity to enforce them. The structural organization of groups can equally determine how they pursue recruitment. If they have control over territory, they may be able to encourage participation through direct contact with families and/or levy 'conscripts' from households. The violent online networks considered in this paper have perhaps the lowest level of organization and presumably the weakest group rules and norms.

Violent groups have varying chain-of-command capacity and other internal measures to enforce rules prohibiting children from participating in violence. NSAGs with centralized structures resembling those of government military units may be better equipped to institute these types of measures across a group. Less clear is the capacity of 'franchise', network and other less rigidly structured violent groups to do this. Other questions requiring greater exploration include whether and how different types of criminal groups could enforce a ban on the recruitment of children.[69] On a practical level, violent organizations may lack the capacity to conduct age assessments to differentiate between children and adults.

Many violent groups that do accept children in their organizations continue to force them to join through abduction and threats. Recruitment can happen across borders and can be perpetrated against migrant children passing through an area in which the group operates. The threat of violence against family and friends or sexual violence against sisters or other loved ones is sometimes used to coerce children to become involved in organized violence.

Members of violent groups may deliberately seek to influence beliefs and attitudes and sometimes recruit children to perpetrate acts of violence. Children's vulnerability to violent messaging may be increased by confirmation biases and by their limited capacity to assess the reliability of the information that is presented to them.[70] Violent groups use a range of messaging for a range of purposes. Some have shared content that depicts or

promotes violence, while others seek to tap into their target audience's personal concerns and broader structural issues. A recent study of child recruitment and involvement in violence in the Lake Chad Basin found that armed groups, including Boko Haram, were more likely to make recruitment promises to children than to adults, including offers of safety, belonging and assistance with marriage.

This process of indoctrination, however, does not necessarily precede association with an NSAG or involvement in a violent act. In the case of young Europeans who travelled to the Syrian Arab Republic to join the Islamic State, a researcher found that their initial motivations were a mix of compassion and humanitarian concern for fellow Sunnis falling victim to the civil war.[71] Only after they arrived in the Syrian Arab Republic did they adhere to a dehumanizing ideology that engaged them in violence.[72] One explanation suggests that acceptance of the violent group's ideology or beliefs does not happen immediately on joining the group but rather results from the dissonance that is created when an individual does something wrong and needs to justify that action.[73] In other situations, a child may feel that they cannot exit the group and therefore need to adopt the ideology or act in a way consistent with it in order to survive. Beliefs develop and change over time with context and experience.

Dynamics within social groups, such as socialization and development of a collective identity, can also contribute to cohesion, recruitment and mobilization by violent groups. In Spain, researchers found that members of NSAGs use a wide repertoire of online and offline tactics to manipulate children into joining their ranks, including deception, seduction, emotional engagement, pressure, coercion and even physical aggression.[74] In this respect, NSAGs are similar to traditional criminal groups or gangs.[75]

Violent groups' use of social media and online gaming chats to promote violence, build relationships and recruit children is a growing area of concern and has received considerable attention. The ubiquitous presence of the internet and social media creates unprecedented opportunities for 'recruiters' to reach millions of followers and access platforms that children use. Some groups seek to profit directly from fame on online platforms.[76] Misinformation and disinformation are easily spread and key factors contributing to this are lack of checks and balances, poor regulation and poor design choices made by platforms. Facebook, Instagram and X have all been used in this way, while more direct communication with children may be increasingly possible through the chat functions of those tools and through dedicated chat applications, such as Discord and Telegram.[77] Some experts are also concerned about the use of online video games and in-gaming chats. These may be used to recruit members into private chat groups where children and young people become exposed to ideologies and narratives that draw them towards joining groups or committing acts of violence.[78] These tactics closely resemble those used for grooming for online sexual exploitation and abuse.[79]

Some violent organizations have also explicitly called for violent action online. Far-right groups in North America and Europe promote 'accelerationist' action, which is intended to disrupt the functioning of the government, bring about clashes within society and replace the local polity with no government (anarchy) or a strong centralized one. In these cases, the individuals or groups in the social network call on individuals to attack infrastructure, police or minorities to

cause insecurity and erode trust in the government.[80] The Islamic State pursued a similar online strategy in 2016, when it began to lose the territory it had captured in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic to military offensives. It urged supporters to attack targets in their home countries instead of trying to travel to the two countries.[81] This inspired a string of attacks, including one by a 17-year-old boy on a train in Germany.[82] Groups posting on incel chats also initially made calls for violence against women and others, although content moderation by social media companies appears to have led to a reduction in explicit messaging. Nevertheless, successful attacks stemming from these various calls appear to have been limited in number, despite initial fears that they would be widespread. Indeed, some hypothesize that social media may provide a different outlet for diffusing conflict.[83]

Online messaging, however, does not appear to be a sufficient tool by itself to recruit children into a violent group. According to a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), internet and social media are not drivers of "radicalization" among young people.[84] Rather, they facilitate the dissemination of information and propaganda and the recruitment of new members.[85] In the UNDP study in Africa, NSAGs adapted their strategies of recruitment by using both online and offline tactics, considering higher or lower levels of internet penetration.[86]

A clearer picture is emerging of the different platforms, how content is used and the links between online and offline relationships. Likewise, more is now known about networks for recruitment and how these can incite and support children to conduct acts of violence. However, these areas likely warrant broader research as online tools develop rapidly and the ability of violent groups to exploit them becomes more sophisticated.
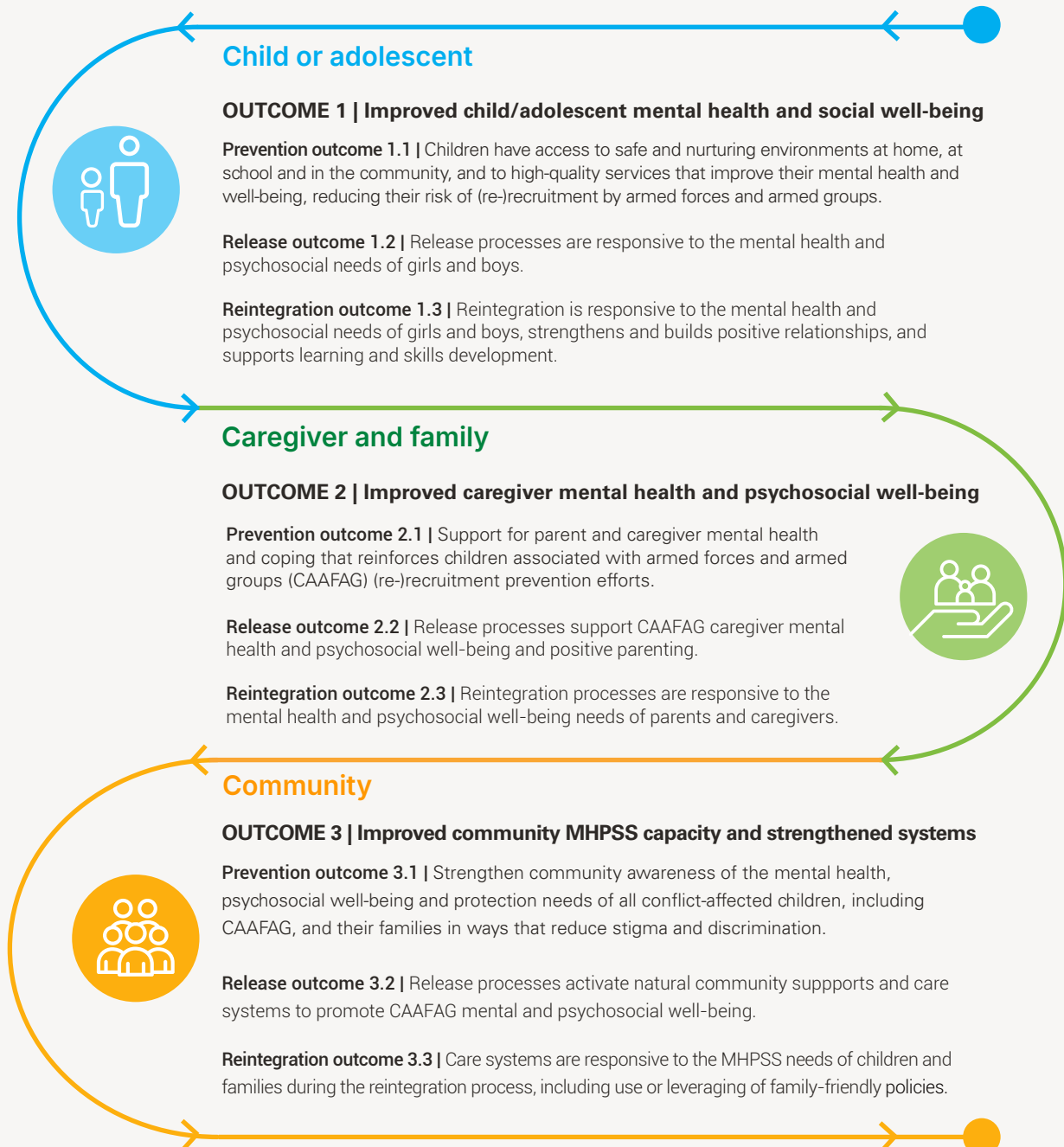
IV. Prevention and response

How have different actors sought to address this problem? What action has proven successful? Where are the gaps in information?

The complexity of drivers leading to the involvement of children and young people in organized violence requires a multidisciplinary response that considers their diverse needs in diverse contexts. Interventions must also adapt to changes in context.

Programmes for prevention, disengagement and reintegration of children and young people involved in organized violence are often multifaceted. They may involve one or more of the components outlined in this section and may be targeted at the level of individual children, families, communities, organizations or broader societies.

Evidence and experience show that the responses which hold the greatest promise to prevent children's involvement in organized violence are early, agile, multidisciplinary and aimed at all levels: the child, family, community, non-state actors and society at large. Such responses can also facilitate the reintegration of children who disengage or are released from violent groups.

Figure 3: Mental health psychosocial support (MHPSS) for children associated with armed forces and armed groups: Operational framework

Child or adolescent

OUTCOME 1 | Improved child/adolescent mental health and social well-being

Prevention outcome 1.1 | Children have access to safe and nurturing environments at home, at school and in the community, and to high-quality services that improve their mental health and well-being, reducing their risk of (re-)recruitment by armed forces and armed groups.

Release outcome 1.2 | Release processes are responsive to the mental health and psychosocial needs of girls and boys.

Reintegration outcome 1.3 | Reintegration is responsive to the mental health and psychosocial needs of girls and boys, strengthens and builds positive relationships, and supports learning and skills development.

Caregiver and family

OUTCOME 2 | Improved caregiver mental health and psychosocial well-being

Prevention outcome 2.1 | Support for parent and caregiver mental health and coping that reinforces children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) (re-)recruitment prevention efforts.

Release outcome 2.2 | Release processes support CAAFAG caregiver mental health and psychosocial well-being and positive parenting.

Reintegration outcome 2.3 | Reintegration processes are responsive to the mental health and psychosocial well-being needs of parents and caregivers.

Community

OUTCOME 3 | Improved community MHPSS capacity and strengthened systems

Prevention outcome 3.1 | Strengthen community awareness of the mental health, psychosocial well-being and protection needs of all conflict-affected children, including CAAFAG, and their families in ways that reduce stigma and discrimination.

Release outcome 3.2 | Release processes activate natural community suppports and care systems to promote CAAFAG mental and psychosocial well-being.

Reintegration outcome 3.3 | Care systems are responsive to the MHPSS needs of children and families during the reintegration process, including use or leveraging of family-friendly policies.

When considering approaches to reintegration, it is important to look at the differences in how children are recruited; their motivations; their experiences in armed groups or gangs; parental and other proximate influences; and the existing protective factors available to each child. Children's identity, age and roles within these groups often have a bearing on the effectiveness of reintegration strategies, as do their sense of belonging, skills, and leadership and decision-making experiences. Some children may not initially want to be reintegrated, as they maintain strong connections to their group. Recruitment can also be a sign of resilience – a chance to survive and make a living – and public policy does not always take this into account. Lastly, consideration must also be given to whether reintegration back into families and communities would generate other or higher risks for some children and, if so, how to help this group of children find alternatives.

> **Committee on the Rights of the Child**
> **General comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child during adolescence, CRC/C/GC/20, 6 December 2016, para. 12.**
>
> "Reaching adolescence can mean exposure to a range of risks, reinforced or exacerbated by the digital environment, including substance use and addiction, violence and abuse, sexual or economic exploitation, trafficking, migration, radicalization or recruitment into gangs or militias. As they approach adulthood, adolescents need suitable education and support to tackle local and global challenges, including poverty and inequality, discrimination, climate change and environmental degradation, urbanization and migration, ageing societies, pressure to perform in school and escalating humanitarian and security crises. Growing up in more heterogeneous and multiethnic societies, as a consequence of increased global migration, also requires greater capacities for understanding, tolerance and coexistence. Investment is needed in measures to strengthen the capacities of adolescents to overcome or mitigate those challenges, address the societal drivers serving to exclude and marginalize them and equip them to face challenging and changing social, economic, and digital environments."

1. Child level

Most approaches to prevention, disengagement/demobilization/release and reintegration place heavy emphasis on actions at the level of the individual concerned. This is unsurprising in view of the complex child development and other personal factors that lead children to engage in organized violence. These programmes typically include one or more of the following elements.

Mental health and psychosocial support interventions[87]

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is at the core of prevention and response action for children who are at risk of joining or already associated with violent groups. These interventions, which aim to address the mental health and well-being of children and their families, use different approaches depending on the perceived risks to the child and the possible impact of any involvement in violence or with an armed group. Humanitarian member organizations of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee conceptualize MHPSS as encompassing a broad spectrum of approaches which reflect the individual needs of children and collective needs of communities. These approaches are depicted as a multilayered pyramid of intervention (*see Figure 4)*. The bottom layer

of the pyramid involves universal preventative interventions and incorporates social considerations in basic services and security for whole populations. The tip of the pyramid represents specialized mental health services aimed at managing existing mental health concerns. This final layer relates to a much smaller caseload of children in need of individualized, specialized responses.

It is critical that interventions are delivered early, are tailored and multidisciplinary, and focus on child well-being in a holistic way. While not exhaustive, the following list includes some recent practices:

▸ **Normalization activities:** These activities include having children return to regular or accelerated education, engage in sports and other recreation/hobbies, and secure a regular livelihood.

▸ **Developing life skills:** The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights assessed the recurring components that contributed to best practices of programmes aimed at preventing and countering "violent extremism" from a human rights perspective.[88] It found that young people are crucial players in prevention efforts and must be engaged in various ways, including through education, arts or sports. The most effective programmes were driven by young people and focused on developing life skills, such as conflict management, teamwork, tolerance and critical thinking. Direct engagement with small groups was found to be more effective than broad online or offline campaigns. Youth must be mobilized on a voluntary basis and their involvement must be inclusive – that is, interventions must not only focus on those at risk of engagement with organized violence.

Figure 4: The Inter-Agency Standing Committee's intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support

1 Social considerations in basic services and security

Special considerations in basic services and security in a way that is participatory, safe and socially appropriate to ensure the dignity and well-being of all children and community members.

2 Family and community supports

Family and community supports for recovery, strengthening resilience and maintenance of mental health and psychosocial well-being of children and families.

3 Focused care

Focused, non-specialized support by trained and supervised workers for children and families, including general (non-specialized) social and primary health services.

4 Specialized care

Specialized services by mental health clinicians and social service professionals for children and families beyond the scope of general (non-specialized) social and primary health services.

Source: Adapted from United Nations Children's Fund, Operational guidelines on community based mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian settings: Three-tiered support for children and families (field test version), New York, UNICEF, 2018, p. 15.

▸ **Constructive social networking:** This approach seeks to create positive peer and other contacts for children in order to shift them away from people who might influence them to engage in organized violence. The United States Department of Defense commissioned an analysis of 30 case studies of initiatives aimed at "deradicalization" – i.e., changing beliefs or encouraging rejection of violent ideologies – from countries around the world. The study identified the following common elements of more "successful" programmes: creating a sense of hope and purpose; building a sense of community; providing individual attention and daily schedules; and ensuring sustainable and long-term commitment after the programme.[89]

▸ **Specialized interventions:** Specialized interventions may be necessary to support children who have experienced symptoms of anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. One example is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), an evidence-based psychotherapy which can be effective in reducing psychological distress and addressing a range of difficulties, including depression and anxiety. By highlighting the link between thoughts, emotions and behaviours, CBT works to adjust thoughts and behaviours in order to improve mood and daily functioning. This approach has demonstrated effectiveness in improving the mental health of children who have left armed forces and armed groups. For example, a randomized control trial in the Democratic Republic of the Congo found that "in comparison to the wait-list control group, the [Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy] intervention group had highly significant reductions in post-traumatic stress symptoms, overall psychosocial distress, depression or anxiety-like symptoms, conduct problems and a significant increase in prosocial behaviour."[90] As mentioned earlier, however, not all children require specialized care.

A narrow focus on individual psychological factors can oversimplify children's involvement in organized violence. Little scientific evidence is available to justify government policy which focuses on the pre-emptive identification of 'at-risk individuals'. Such approaches often rely on surveillance and discriminatory profiling that increasingly leverages online tools, including artificial intelligence (AI).[91] They also tend to ignore broader contextual factors and normalized social control, including among children and young people in schools.[92]

Education and livelihood support[93]

Education and livelihood support can contribute to preventing children from joining violent groups and accepting related beliefs.[94] Education can be a source of resilience for children and decrease their vulnerability to recruitment. Interpretation of religious precepts by some groups to promote violence can be addressed by inviting scholars who follow a school of thought more aligned with child rights to engage with communities and children. In some countries and communities, however, informal education is more influential in this regard and a local preacher may command more influence over children, families and communities than schoolteachers. Education and livelihood support also contribute to normalization and reintegration for children who disengage or are released from violent groups by providing options for a future.

Peacebuilding and social cohesion curricula and activities in schools have been used to address root causes and prevent children's involvement in organized violence.[95] A study in Canada stressed the importance of promoting inclusive programmes and policies to tackle bullying and polarization in educational institutions to reduce incentives for some children to join

violent groups.[96] Questions have been raised, however, about the extent to which teachers can tackle this issue – and the many other social challenges the education system is increasingly asked to address – while delivering the main education curriculum. Furthermore, if teachers are asked to monitor the behaviour of students and report those at risk of joining violent NSAGs or gangs, this may result in an adversarial relationship with the students. Depending on the context, teachers may even face the threat of retaliation.

It is important to help children and young people re-enter education and vocational training programmes. Education can help normalize a situation for children who have suffered during their time with a violent group. After what can sometimes be years away from formal schooling, some may have fallen out of learning habits or may have fallen behind their peers. Some children do not want to return to school after having been treated as an adult within a violent group. Responses might therefore include specialized education classes, including accelerated learning, and vocational training to prepare children for an occupation outside of the violent group. Vocational training is often accompanied by support to find work or start a small business.

Health care and shelter

Children released from armed groups are often provided with medical care. Beyond the mental health impact, many children will have suffered poor health and injuries while engaged with an NSAG. Some are also treated for substance abuse. Girls may additionally need to receive sexual and reproductive health care, including treatment for cases of rape. It is also important to place children and young people in an environment in which they can heal and which allows them to progress towards reintegration. In some cases, they receive the initial care necessary for reintegration before being reunited with family and transitioning into their home or another community.

Children who exit violent groups may require temporary shelter before they can be reunited with their families and communities. Temporary shelter is often needed in special reintegration settings so that children remain safe during this transition. Some boys and girls may also require temporary or longer-term alternative care options because they face risks at home or because parents and family members are deceased or unwilling to accept the children back. Ideally, these children would be supported in a family-based setting, such as a foster home, but sometimes they are also cared for in an institutional setting, such as a child protection home.

Justice and accountability

Diversion and alternative non-custodial measures should be available, even for serious offences. Children have to be protected from detention.[97] The United Nations Study on Violence against Children and the United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty reveal that detention is directly harmful to the mental and physical health and well-being of children and places them at an extremely high risk of violence[98] across all situations of deprivation of liberty.[99] The approaches that have proven to be most effective and result in better outcomes for children and communities are those that channel children as early as possible from the formal justice system (diversion) and resort to non-custodial alternative measures, including restorative justice and community-based programmes.[100] Nevertheless, transitional justice still varies across jurisdictions with regard to the treatment of children in armed conflict or post-conflict situations. Different detention facilities

– pre-trial, security or other types – are still being used as punishment for children's association with condemned NSAGs or while they are awaiting another solution, such as repatriation and reintegration.

Governments use different legal lenses to view the use of children to commit acts of violence, acts of violence themselves and the groups responsible. Acts of violence perpetrated by criminal organizations may be treated very differently from those committed by children in armed conflict situations. Under these different frameworks, the legal treatment of children and programmes for them may vary in approach and design; so, too, may the willingness of governments to view children (or those who committed crimes while children) as victims.

Committee on the Rights of the Child
General comment No. 25 (2021) on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment, CRC/C/GC/25, 2 March 2021, para. 83.

"The digital environment can open up new ways for non-State groups, including armed groups designated as terrorist or violent extremist, to recruit and exploit children to engage with or participate in violence. States parties should ensure that legislation prohibits the recruitment of children by terrorist or violent extremist groups. Children accused of criminal offenses in that context should be treated primarily as victims but, if charged, the child justice system should apply."

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is clear that children who have been involved in organized violence should be treated primarily as victims and should not be detained solely because of their association with an NSAG. When released or captured from an NSAG, children must be transferred to civilian child protection workers as soon as possible. In many countries, including those in the Sahel and Central Africa, handover protocols set out procedures and expectations so that children are not placed in security detention facilities.[101] Likewise, treaties call for the assistance and protection of children who have been transnationally trafficked (including those recruited) for exploitation by organized criminal groups.[102]

From the moment of contact with the justice system, children should also have access to timely, high-quality, free legal aid or representation to prevent deprivation of liberty. Diversion and alternatives to pre-trial detention and imprisonment are used more frequently in countries that have state-funded specialized legal aid services for children and legal aid providers who specialize in working with children.[103]

Improving assessment and case management

Ongoing efforts are needed to better understand the different benefits and incentives for children exiting violent groups – where they will live, how they will get back to school and how they will support themselves or be supported. It is also important to explore needs assessment approaches that go further than merely assessing risks, as these can help broaden the focus beyond traumatic experiences and securitization that complicates reintegration. Such approaches may include assessment or determination of the best interests of the child, case assessments or care plans, and

diversion case management.

2. Family and community level

Community activities and family support can help to prevent the recruitment and use of children by violent groups. They are also important in achieving children's lasting reintegration once they disengage or are released from such groups. Prevention of children's involvement in organized violence sits among a much broader selection of parenting programmes that aim to prevent violence against children, domestic violence (which can lead to children becoming violent themselves) and negative behaviour by strengthening bonds and relationships from birth to adolescence.[104] With regard to organized violence more specifically, the new *Paris Principles Operational Handbook* documents a wide range of approaches for community engagement and family support aimed at ending the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, including to reinforce prevention. These approaches include:

▸ working with communities on livelihood strategies for the families of at-risk children.

▸ community risk-mapping and community monitoring.

▸ developing school safety plans and mobilizing adults to escort children to school.

▸ supporting families to develop family safety plans so that children may avoid recruitment.

▸ public information campaigns on the risk of recruitment and association.

▸ outreach to families that may view recruitment positively.

▸ gender-sensitive peer caregiver support.[105]

These approaches reflect research which suggests that "family acceptance, social support, and educational/economic opportunities [are] associated with improved psychosocial adjustment."[106]

In its analysis of broad efforts to address "violent extremism", the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has suggested that community engagement and community-based empowerment initiatives tend to be more successful when those communities have a pre-existing relationship with authorities such as security forces and social and educational services. Fostering this engagement requires continuous and long-term investment in basic services, as well as ongoing efforts to respond to needs, integrate a gender-sensitive lens and avoid stigmatization. The involvement of security forces must be carefully considered, however, as prevention and response programmes should not be used for surveillance or intelligence purposes.

Community engagement and family support are equally important in facilitating the reintegration of children who disengage or are released from violent groups. Because of their actions, children and their families may be viewed with suspicion, leading to their stigmatization and isolation. This, in turn, can create incentives for the affected child to return to an armed group or gang or otherwise participate in harmful behaviour. For example, a qualitative study with 22 children

who had been released from NSAGs in Colombia to a government reintegration programme found that community and family rejection posed a significant barrier to the children's reintegration and negatively affected their mental health.[107] Reintegration is therefore often planned with the community to help mitigate this risk and ensure a long-term solution. The *Paris Principles Operational Handbook* again points to activities that can be used to support communities and families. These include:

▸ providing support to caregivers of returning children (including mental health care, counselling on how to help the child and household financial strategies to reduce the incentives for joining the groups).

▸ facilitating open discussion sessions to discuss fears, assumptions and expectations.

▸ encouraging communities to develop compassion towards the children's experiences and understand how these might affect the children's behaviour.

▸ identifying and supporting existing community-based conflict prevention and social cohesion initiatives.

▸ involving the most respected community members to encourage more positive attitudes.

▸ providing support that benefits communities as a whole to reduce perceptions that certain children are being 'rewarded' with special treatment.[108]

Community-based approaches need to be implemented with caution, however, to prevent the inadvertent message (and related incentive) that involvement with the armed group or criminal organization will bring benefits to the community.

3. Organization level

A number of approaches are used to influence the behaviour of violent groups so that they do not recruit children and release them if they already have them in their ranks. These approaches vary significantly, and exploring and comparing them may be a worthwhile avenue for future research and analysis.

Engagement with violent groups to secure commitments to end recruitment and use of children is an important tool that is approached differently depending on the context. Child protection actors have been negotiating the release of children from NSAGs and national armed forces since at least the early 1990s. These efforts became more formalized with their introduction of the United Nations Security Council's thematic agenda on children and armed conflict. Among the aims of the United Nations Security Council are those of ending and preventing the grave violation of child rights in situations of armed conflict by pressing parties to conflict to bring their actions into compliance with international law. It has a range of tools that it can use for this purpose, including sanctions.

The United Nations has now negotiated dozens of signed action plans with NSAGs. These include concrete steps to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children.[109] The non-governmental organization Geneva Call has also negotiated similar unilateral Deeds of Commitment or otherwise negotiated with many other NSAGs. These action plans and commitments require NSAGs to release children associated with them – not just fighters but children playing any function

within the armed group, including auxiliary ones like cooks, lookouts, and those used for sexual exploitation and abuse in the group. These action plans and commitments also require NSAGs to adjust their internal rules and procedures to ban any future recruitment of children, communicate the ban to their forces and put in place age-assessment measures. The international legal framework facilitates this engagement, since the recruitment and use of children by NSAGs in situations of armed conflict is prohibited under international law. This approach has limits, however, as not all NSAGs want to engage with the United Nations or child protection actors and some do not recognize international law. In some situations, governments also prohibit child protection actors from contacting armed groups as they feel doing so could confer legitimacy to them or otherwise strengthen them.

Beyond negotiation, governments have reflected international instruments in national law to deter the recruitment and use of children in violence. The following all offer children protections against recruitment and use: the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict; the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; the Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols; and international labour law, particularly on the worst forms of child labour (International Labour Organization Convention 182). However, governments often face challenges in enforcing these laws, since they do not always have access to armed groups to arrest perpetrators or remove children. The International Criminal Court has heard cases against and sentenced leaders of NSAGs who have recruited and used children under the age of 15, as doing so amounts to a war crime.

The available approaches for engaging organized criminal groups are less clear. In some contexts, governments might discourage contact with these groups and group leaders themselves may not be interested in ending the recruitment of children. No international law explicitly bans children from joining gangs and some national laws protecting the freedom of association make outright prohibition challenging. Some governments, however, are beginning to crack down on the recruitment of children into organized criminal groups. In the United States, many state legislators have passed laws that criminalize such practices and stipulate punishments – including fines and prison time – for adults engaging in them.[110] Some public health intervention models have also shown promise.[111] A more thorough review of national practice is needed to shed light on this topic, together with an assessment of how international instruments might be more explicitly applied to the protection of children.

When engaging with armed groups and exploring effective methods for 'walking them back', it is critical to know which groups are keen to engage and change their behaviour. It is sometimes assumed that violent groups act similarly, although that has been proven not to be the case. Some may be more interested in securing political legitimacy so that they can play a governing role in the future, while others have very little interest in aligning with global norms. Some groups rely on a high number of children for their operations, while in others, children have a negligible presence. Certain groups are condemned as 'terrorist groups', which may make humanitarian engagement with them challenging. A mapping can provide context-specific knowledge of the groups, including their structure, leadership, processes and rules as well as other aspects of their organization.[112]

Child protection online

Activities to deter online 'radicalization' and child recruitment have grown significantly and continue to be an area that requires more study. Much of the work in this area appears to be on the prevention side.

There is a need to know why children go online, the kind of environment they face and how violent groups use these spaces to recruit. In drafting general comment No. 25 on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment, the Committee on the Rights of the Child found that there was no clear distinction between online and offline environments, and caution is therefore required in considering these separately. Nevertheless, looking at both online and offline behaviours can help to clarify how the online environment affects children. There is also a need to better understand the online ecology and how algorithms are used to expose children to dangerous and "radicalizing" materials. Within this, it is important to explore how children's vulnerability may be affected by disinhibition and other factors unique to the digital environment, such as anonymity or permanence.

Digital literacy skills can aid children's critical thinking about the messaging and narratives that may be used to attract them to a group. The importance of interventions aimed at developing such skills have therefore been emphasized for youth as well as for people of other ages.

Protecting children against online violence requires support from families, teachers, members of the social service workforce, health professionals and others who work directly with children. In particular, they need to understand how to mitigate the risks posed to children and how to respond to incidents. Red flags that a child is at risk of joining a violent group or committing acts of violence often go unnoticed. This is a big gap area for which strategies to increase awareness and knowledge are available.

Recognizing the need to identify harmful material and prevent child exposure to it, various actors have sought to disrupt the information operations of violent groups online. This may be achieved by removing content – some of which is child-specific – as well as by deploying counternarratives to prevent the spread of violent ideologies online and the cultivation of those beliefs. However, preventing the dissemination of violent group content can be challenging. While social media companies have developed tools powered by algorithms to identify and remove such content, this is not always done consistently or in a timely manner. Those trying to promote a counternarrative are also at a disadvantage because they are responding to an existing narrative. Alternative narratives can be more effective. In South-East Asia, some organizations trying to disrupt online approaches of violent groups are working with influencers to partner with civil society organizations on social messages. This enables them to bridge the online and offline worlds and explore ways to make the approach authentic.

Other actors are beginning to leverage storytelling and gaming approaches, a response to violent groups' use of video games and their chat functions to expose children to their ideologies and narratives and for recruitment.[113] Research on social movements shows that people join due to strong ties with associated friends and family. However, online socialization in contexts such as gaming environments can create strong relationships among groups – for example, strong squad mentalities – which likely leads to a shift from weak to strong ties. There is therefore huge potential for good to

come out of gaming approaches: as well as creating a sense of meaning and building a community, they can provide opportunities for developing alternative narratives and other interventions. Greater understanding is needed of how these approaches could be used in practice and the impact they could have on preventing recruitment of children.

However, there are challenges with blocking and removing online content and developing counternarratives. These relate both to human rights and effectiveness. Removal of harmful content must be in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments ensuring freedom of information and must be lawful (see text from general comment No. 25, paragraph 54, in the box below). With regard to effectiveness, questions remain as to whether these interventions positively influence the target audience's behaviour or beliefs.[114] Nevertheless, research has shown that counternarrative programming may have some benefit in leading to referral to offline counselling.[115]

Committee on the Rights of the Child
General comment No. 25 (2021) on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment, CRC/C/GC/25, 2 March 2021, para. 54.

"States parties should protect children from harmful and untrustworthy content and ensure that relevant businesses and other providers of digital content develop and implement guidelines to enable children to safely access diverse content, recognizing children's rights to information and freedom of expression, while protecting them from such harmful material in accordance with their rights and evolving capacities. Any restrictions on the operation of any Internet-based, electronic or other information dissemination systems should be in line with article 13 of the Convention [on the Rights of the Child]."

4. Structural level: Social, economic and political factors

Structural and governance issues often persist over the long term and can fuel an environment of conflict and violence more generally. Effort needs to be directed towards measures to reduce abuses and violence committed by non-state and government actors through the strengthening of international and domestic monitoring, compliance and accountability. Peacekeeping and peacebuilding are among the broad approaches that are used to address these problems and can represent the building blocks of a new or revised social contract. Experts have reinforced the importance of addressing children's issues and meaningfully engaging children in each of these.[116]

Efforts to provide assistance, secure child rights and improve child well-being in these contexts may contribute to lessening the root causes of children's feelings of dissatisfaction, lack of opportunities and hopelessness. Successful programmes invest in a protective environment for children and young people, through a 'continuum of care' for the individuals concerned, their families and their communities.

V. Evidence for action: Developing a research and foresight agenda

Stakeholders should invest in comprehensive measures, centred on child rights, that are proven to work against various manifestations of organized violence, including hate speech, self-harm, violent acts and other actions resulting in harm to self and others. This means understanding the phenomenon in its complexity in different contexts and tackling the root causes of exclusion, discrimination and vulnerability. Responses should also be tailored to the individual needs of the child, focusing on their best interests while also being community-based. They also need to be multisectoral.

Many new areas of research warrant further exploration, and a research and foresight agenda is needed to inform action, systems strengthening and service delivery. This agenda must acknowledge that significant global transition and transformation is underway. Data and evidence on different topics from different countries will contribute to developing a more comprehensive picture of the involvement of children in organized violence, the risks posed by climate and other vulnerabilities, and issues of child recruitment in the digital world. Among the suggestions listed below are those that have emerged from the working paper and round table. The list includes questions that would require different levels of analysis and a range of research methodologies.

1. Leveraging normative child rights instruments

Research could reinforce the use of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other instruments to prevent children's involvement in organized violence and protect those who have become involved.

▸ What legislative and policy commitments does the Convention on the Rights of the Child require governments to make to comprehensively address 'organized violence'? What legislation or policy has been associated with positive outcomes vis-à-vis children and organized violence? For example, with regard to articles 13, 17, 19, 23, 36, 37 and 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and other laws, norms and standards, how should these apply to children involved in organized violence in a way that might prove beneficial to them? It could be useful to conduct further analysis of the application of the provisions for the prevention of child labour and exploitation, as well as those addressing the evolving capacities of the child. General comment No. 25 (2021) on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment could be further unpacked in relation to online recruitment. Meanwhile, the interpretation and application of general comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child during Adolescence could help to identify concrete actions to protect children.

2. Root causes of child involvement in organized violence

It nevertheless remains challenging to understand the root causes of children's involvement in organized violence that might be applicable in different contexts and situations. An evidence-

generation agenda must also recognize the complexity of children's decision-making; how families and households work as a unit; the influence of community members and leaders, social norms, and peers; and how drivers and risks contribute to a dynamic model. Nuances of child identity and belonging should also be explored: the factors that contribute to child well-being, including safety and contentment, and how children and young people perceive their identities.

▸ What are the regional and country-specific root causes?

▸ What is the relationship between mental health and the adoption of violent ideas among children? Existing evidence suggests that individuals already experiencing depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation are more vulnerable to violent ideas. However, greater understanding is needed of the common risk factors and causality of these relationships as well as opportunities to build or enhance trauma- and resilience-informed solutions.

▸ How might advances in behavioural science help identify and analyse risks and children's motivations to join organized violent groups?

▸ What issues and circumstances will mobilize children to take or not take violent action in the future? How can root causes be mitigated by multisectoral services that promote child and family rights, dignity, protection, and mental health and well-being?

3. Prevention of child involvement in organized violence

More research and understanding of family and community resilience and intervention policies could lead to further improvement of context-specific measures in local systems.

▸ What has worked to prevent children from being involved in organized violence and why? Research and analysis should examine positive actions within the socio-ecological model or protective environment that have contributed to mitigating risk and building the resilience of children, families and communities in the face of threats of recruitment.

▸ What role has discrimination and abuse by state actors played in children's involvement in organized violence? How might those policies and practices be adjusted to prevent recruitment of children?

▸ Can child and youth activism act as a potential mitigator of child involvement in organized violence? How can children's positive activism be leveraged? What role and impact do human rights curricula in education systems have in addressing drivers and preventing the involvement of children in organized violence? What other measures have proved effective in school systems?

▸ How can alternative positive narratives be applied to prevent child involvement in the different types of organized violence?

▸ How do MHPSS prevention interventions work to mitigate risk factors and recruitment?

4. Child recruitment online and the role of technology

Child protection actors are seeking further guidance on how best to intervene to prevent the engagement of children in violence in the constantly changing digital landscape. This applies especially to the areas of gaming, AI, the dark web and evolving social media.

▸ How much is known about the online lives of children? How does the digital space differ from the offline world in driving and enabling child involvement in organized violence?

▸ How do digital technologies compound broader negative social environmental influences? In what ways is the online world facilitating and contributing to children's harmful associations and involvement in organized violence? What measures have proven effective in mitigating this impact?

▸ How does online behaviour and expression translate into practice? There is a need to understand the difference between thoughts and actions in relation to child involvement in organized violence.

▸ What are the pathways through which children are exposed to violent groups online? What are the factors that lead a child to act in the real world?

▸ How can AI and generative AI be used to spread propaganda and facilitate the recruitment of children into violent groups and networks? What role might these have in inspiring or inciting violence?

▸ What types of armed groups, movements and networks could emerge as the result of people's unprecedented connectivity and how might children be recruited or otherwise involved in these? A deeper understanding of how technology will continue to reshape organized violence will be important for crafting anticipatory policy.

▸ How do information technology companies deal with other threats and are there lessons across platforms on this? What can be learned from analysis of the criminal use of grooming for sexual exploitation and abuse? What are the opportunities for ethical, cross-platform innovation?

5. The role of armed non-state actors and networks that promote violence

NSAGs continue to adapt methods of 'warfare' to confront their adversaries. Organized criminal groups are also growing in influence through control of local areas, transnational movement of illicit goods, and trafficking in drugs, weapons and people. Likewise, online networks that promote violence have the potential to grow and to direct children to act, especially as AI becomes an increasingly sophisticated tool. Ongoing research and foresight will be needed in order to understand how violent groups operate and how they can be influenced.

▸ How are violent groups organized? What does social network analysis tell us already about these groups, and what gaps remain in the knowledge base that can be addressed by innovative new methods? What rules, procedures and other beliefs do groups have in relation to violence against children and the use of children for violence? How do they enforce these rules, procedures and beliefs?

- When a violent group controls and provides services in a particular territory, how does that influence children, families and communities?

- What are the different manifestations of organized violence as expressed by different types of violent groups?

- What lessons have been learned from engaging with different types of violent groups? What factors need to be considered for impactful engagement with NSAGs, organized criminal groups and violent networks?

6. Release and reintegration of children

As with risks and patterns of recruitment, the release and reintegration of children is also contextual. In most cases, children will face a range of challenges. For some of these children, mechanisms will need to be identified to allow them to transition out of violent groups and find meaning.

- What differences are there between effective release and reintegration programmes for children disengaged from NSAGs, organized criminal groups and violent networks? What similarities are there between these three types of groups? And how can children be 'released' from violent networks online?

- What programming has been effective for sustainable community-based reintegration and for addressing the mental health impacts of child involvement in organized violence at the child, family and community levels? Which existing approaches are proving to be the most effective? What types of action are necessary to support children from the different types of groups who cannot return to their home communities? And what are the best ways to support children returning to homes in which violent groups continue to have influence and control?

- What are the lived experiences of children once they return to their communities? How do they interact with the communities to which they return? What types of social interaction do they have and are they prepared for that? What support do they need? What support do their caregivers need, including for their mental health?

- How can different sectors best work together to address impacts across the socio-ecological model, to holistically meet the needs of children and families?

- How can prevention and reintegration programmes address the prosocial benefits that children may derive from participating in violent groups?

7. Research and foresight resources and methods

In addition to the specific topics outlined above, the agenda would greatly benefit from further strengthening of research and foresight related to children's involvement in organized violence. The following are some of the steps that might be taken to achieve this:

1.

DEVELOP additional knowledge assets: A collection of resources on children involved in different types of organized violence does not currently exist. An open master bibliography could be developed and maintained. An evidence synthesis of key literature related to the topic in general or on subtopics of interest could also be undertaken. A living synopsis could be compiled and updated regularly, connected to strong policy advocacy.

2.

DEVELOP cross-group analysis: A number of common silos may limit understanding of the situation of children being recruited into violent groups and how to address it. More effort therefore needs to be given to developing tools for researching and analysing the phenomenon in ways that break down these silos. A network of interested scholars, researchers and practitioners could be established to initiate this and chart a way forward.

3.

EXPAND ethical research and analysis with children: Of the information that exists globally on this topic, a limited amount originates from the children themselves. This gap could be addressed by conducting ethical research and analyses that are child-sensitive, that do not stigmatize children and that draw on primary data collected from children. Children and young people have hopes, dreams and aspirations of their own; they may therefore be able to offer valuable insights on the issues likely to mobilize children and on what might aid prevention work. In terms of reintegration, research could be conducted with children on their experiences and the issues that they face, including the transformative memories of children who have been in NSAGs or organized criminal groups. This research could play an important role in rebuilding their lives and addressing future challenges, thereby helping to prevent reincidence and empower children. Due to the risks facing both children and researchers, it may be necessary to employ retrospective research instead of collecting data from children who are still engaged with violent organizations. A range of other serious ethical considerations would also need to be incorporated into any plans to collect data from children deprived of their liberty.

4.

LOCALIZE data collection on children's involvement in organized violence: Providing support to academic, non-governmental and community-based organizations in affected countries could strengthen their capacities to document children's involvement in organized violence and contribute to broader cross-border efforts on the topic. This capacity-strengthening must not neglect ethical issues, such as those relating to data collection on sensitive issues with children, principles of consent, best interests of children and 'do no harm'. It must also include measures to ensure personal and institutional security and to mitigate and address secondary trauma among data collectors.

5.

STRENGTHEN and broaden partnerships and networks for research and foresight: Work could be carried out with academic institutions, think tanks, governments and others to address current and on-the-horizon issues. Collaboration with community-based organizations that have timely detailed knowledge of local situations can be extremely valuable for research and foresight. Partnerships that bring together the United Nations, academic institutions in affected and other countries, and community-based organizations can be effective in generating strong new knowledge while building capacity in countries affected by conflict and violence. However, potential biases should be borne in mind when selecting research partners.

6.

DESIGN accessible products suited to specific audiences: Information should be packaged and disseminated in different ways to make it more accessible, including through the use of plain language, short, reader-friendly formats and rapid assessments. With regard to preventing online recruitment, more effort should be made to ensure that these products reach digital platforms, as well as the trust and safety teams, regulators, security agencies and field offices of the concerned companies.■

Endnotes

1   This definition draws from several resources that help to define violence carried out by an organization. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction defines violence as "the intentional or unintentional use of force whether physical or psychological, threatened or actual, against an individual, oneself, or against a group of people, a community, or a government. Violence can either be targeted or indiscriminate, motivated by certain aims, including political, religious, social, economic, ethnic, racial, or gender-based, or unintentional and can be initiated with the aim to directly or indirectly inflict harm, injury or death."; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 'Violence', UNDRR, Geneva, n.d., <www.undrr.org/understanding-disaster-risk/terminology/hips/so0006#:~:text=Violence%20refers%20to%20the%20intentional,a%20community%2C%20or%20a%20government>, accessed 20 June 2024.

Similarly, the World Health Organization defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation."; Krug, Etienne G., et al., eds., *World Report on Violence and Health*, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2002.

Government armed forces also clearly recruit and use children to carry out acts of violence and collaborate with or direct the actions of NSAGs, including private military contractors. Government forces are not included in this analysis and nor are private military companies because, although they are private companies, they most often collaborate with governments through an outsourcing model that involves a formal contract or other agreement.

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Acknowledgements

About us

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents — and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfill their potential, from early childhood through adolescence. And we never give up.

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight tackles the questions of greatest importance for children, both current and emerging. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represents the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development. The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

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