



Children as agents of positive change

A mapping of children's initiatives across regions, towards an inclusive and healthy world free from violence



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Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

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“Children are not clueless as you think they are. They have a voice, and no voice should be shut out. Being a child doesn’t mean our voices are less credible. Moreover, it should serve as an insight as to what the situation in sectors that you may have forgotten or have not given much importance is like”.

Boy, 10, Philippines¹

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1.

Introduction: children as “part of the solutions” in a world free of violence

For more than thirty years the world has recognized children’s right to participate. But participation has evolved, and with globalization, so has the world, children, technology and its availability. Children’s engagement and participation is continually progressing and increasing, as a result of the rapid evolution of information and communications technologies (ICTs), children’s growing empowerment, and the rising real-time exchange of information around the world.

We are in the midst of a new era of child engagement, where children are to be considered partners and key players in achieving change. Children are acting against violence and being part of the solution everywhere, taking forward positive change, working as partners with adults and young people. But today children are not always relying on adults acting as intermediaries of participation. Social movements in different parts the world are showing how children are determined to bring forward change with or without adults, hence the importance of adults assuming a guiding and protective role in these processes.

Children are more informed, they are more aware of their rights, they are increasingly expressing their concerns and experiences, being consulted by decision makers, and provided with as well as developing their own participation spaces. Their concerns are more frequently being taken into account when shaping programmes and policies, as well as when working with different organizations, their schools, children’s committees and councils. States are seeing the benefits of involving children in their discussions, in addressing violence and in their work towards fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals; they are giving more attention to children’s voices, actions and concerns. But there is still much work to be done to guarantee that children can fully exercise their rights to participation and be safe while doing so.

“They have to feel, speak, think and hear like a child to take the right decisions for children. In order to protect our rights, our voices have to be heard and taken seriously. Make our voice your choice.”
Girl, 17, Pakistan²

The work of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children is based on a holistic and child-rights

centered approach that emphasizes the role of children as agents of change and their capacity for leadership in building a world free from violence. As such, child participation is one of the key strategic priority areas that respond to the overall vision that, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children be considered by governments and relevant decision makers as key players in decision-making processes related to violence and protection.

As part of the mandate's goal to promote meaningful participation, amplify children's voices and actions and leave no one behind, the Special Representative took forward a mapping exercise to understand how children are taking part in today's world, contributing with their views and solutions, and being agents of positive change. Between April and November 2020, 245 case studies from 86 countries³ were reviewed,⁴ and in-depth dialogues were taken forward with 36 organizations working at global, regional, or country level.⁵ Additionally, through UNICEF's U-Report, almost 5000 children from all geographical regions aged 13 - 18 were polled regarding their experiences regarding COVID-19. U-Report results revealed that since the epidemic began, 62% of children said their friends have been able to help them when they've needed support, more than half have seen an increase in their friends' need for support from their peers, while 50% don't know where to ask for help if they're victims of violence.

Evidence collected from mapping children's participation during times of COVID-19 shows that:

Children are increasingly being considered partners by decision makers: they're taking action by becoming informed and involved in issues that affect them and informing decision makers; they're working with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and others, they're coming up with recommendations while demonstrating profound knowledge regarding the issues that affect them. They're leading advocacy actions, and child-led research; they're raising awareness and helping bridge essential services, including violence reporting. They're connecting with decision makers and adult experts, and more importantly, there is an exchange of knowledge and experience through rich and valuable intergenerational dialogues.

Children are working with other children, creating collective actions and support systems: Children are connecting with other children, and are especially suited to reach those hardest to reach. Through their networks they are in permanent contact with each other and are particularly skillful in reaching their peers in times when on the ground presence and access to services are limited. They're mentoring and helping train their peers, they're supporting and reaching out to one another, helping prevent violence, and providing support and reporting referrals. Children are aware of other children's needs, and they're willing and able to support them.

The following report provides an overview of the different actions taken forward by children mostly in times of COVID-19, but not limited to it. It looks at children's diverse roles when helping to prevent, address, and report violence (including supporting their peers); it helps to understand how children are contributing and being part of the solutions

when thinking about building back better, and how children are helping accelerate fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It showcases how children are collaborating with adults and with decision makers, and how children are proving to be agents of change. The report also addresses the many challenges organizations and children have faced in times of COVID-19,

including those posed by digital channels when taking forward participation, reaching the hardest to reach, and having regular communication with children disrupted. Finally, based on the findings from the different experiences analyzed, this report provides key recommendations to support children's participation and civic engagement.



II.



Evolving roles of children in ending violence against children

“Remember, even one voice becomes so powerful when the world chooses to be silent. It took me quite a long time to have a voice. Now that I have it I am not going to be silent, because every child has the right to be heard.”

John 16, Philippines⁶

The evidence drawn from the different examples reviewed shows that children’s role within civic engagement and participation is evolving. When Member States and decision makers provide children with the space to be part of processes that affect them, children have shown that they can take positive change forward. They have proved to be effective in reaching other children, and in providing unique perspectives, while adults continue to work with them by helping build skills, capacities and provide guidance in a safe and protective manner, building a true partnership.

II.1.

Increased digitization has also increased participation

The political will of the international community, individual Member States and society at large - combined with rapidly

evolving technology - have been determining factors for children to increasingly take a more active role on issues affecting them and their communities. As never before, children have been using information and communications technologies (ICTs) to exchange concerns, support their actions, disseminate their messages, create communities and reach millions of other children, amongst many other uses. There are both benefits and risks for children when it comes to engaging through the digital world. Internet access enables children to exercise different rights, including self-expression, accessing knowledge, resources, and support systems for both preventing, responding and reporting violence: today, children who are connected have higher chances of accessing help. But at the same time, when online, children are at risks of multiple forms of violence, reinforcing the need for stronger measures to ensure child online protection and digital safety, including policies, legislation, training, and awareness-raising.

Before COVID-19, approximately one in three children had Internet access, though accessibility was and is unevenly available, depending on factors such as geography, socio-economic conditions, rural versus

urban, gender, and race. Although efforts are being made to address the digital divide, there is no definite evidence on how children's connectivity has changed since the onset of the pandemic.

Since COVID-19 started, up to 1.6 billion children⁷ and young people have been affected by school closures, and millions do not have Internet access at home (two thirds of the world's children according to a recent UNICEF – ITU report).⁸ This has proven to be a determining factor for children's engagements and child protection, as **organizations have had to bring to a halt child participation initiatives, adapt to online means where possible, support children by providing access and devices, and strengthen children's digital safety due to the increasing number of risks children face online.**

In Africa,⁹ adolescents and young people launched the 'Free Internet regional campaign', advocating for equal quality access of online education for all. The campaign aims to establish a dialogue platform for African students to engage with each other, discuss advantages and challenges of accessibility for all during COVID-19, and propose solutions for a sustainable and quality digital education for all.

Where connectivity is available, there are many benefits to children in regard to their participation, including access to information and capacity building around issues such as online protection; services such as mental health support and violence reporting systems.

In countries with high Internet penetration, children are accessing the digital world at an increasingly younger age, and organizations see a growing degree of responsibility and empowerment with these children. In the UK, Canada, United States and Australia,¹⁰ a child safe social community platform built for children under 12 by the private sector is *"seeing a growing empowerment of kids. With kids spending more time at home, parents are empowering them with greater digital responsibility. It wouldn't have happened in a real-life sense, but it is happening in a digital sense"*.¹¹ Preliminary research is showing that these young adolescents are also more aware of their digital privacy and protection, with a growing notion of their tracked Internet experience and of their digital rights.

In Spain,¹² a national helpline has seen an increase in violence reporting since they included children's suggestion of working through text and chat, in addition to phone: *"We adapted our helpline so children would feel comfortable in expressing themselves. We are even using a friendlier and simpler format, with short and direct messages. We incorporated all of children's suggestions into the design. Reporting has increased a lot after this. Children feel comfortable with this new format as they can talk about things, they wouldn't feel comfortable expressing out loud. There's more intimacy"*.¹³ The experience of a helpline in Chile¹⁴ has been similar; it reported a 376% growth in incoming requests for help when they included additional digital channels for children to contact mental health professionals.

Many of the benefits of online means within protection have been especially noticed during COVID-19. **Organizations have pointed out that children are accessing child protection services or other means of support, which they would have not accessed if it were not for the pandemic. Organizations that had to interrupt their presence in the field due to COVID-19 are able to reach children through online means, and children are creating new communities around mental health, safety, and empowerment. Also, online models are proving to be less expensive and more cost-effective.**

Organizations have also identified benefits when creating safe and intimate spaces for children to express themselves in legal proceedings, while online. In Indonesia¹⁵ an organization providing legal assistance to children pointed out that because of COVID the cases have been taken forward online: *“so the child victim does not need to physically meet the perpetrator. This makes the victim and his or her family feel comfortable in conveying the chronology of what was experienced without worrying about being pressured by the perpetrator”*.¹⁶

Just like online access presents a number of opportunities for children, the lack of it can also be an impediment for the fulfilment of their rights: Children without access to the Internet have fewer chances of exercising their rights to interact, access information, education, protection services and participate, hindering their development. On the other hand, those who do have access are at risk of being victims of different forms of online violence, and in the absence of offline safeguarding and protection systems the right to protection is also challenged.

Also, when participation online is limited to social networks (and not taken to alternative platforms), an additional barrier faced by younger children is the minimum age limitation required. Under thirteens are sometimes excluded and being untruthful about their age puts them at even higher risks of being victims of online threats.



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The digital divide, for the reasons mentioned before, is posing great challenges to children’s participation. A coalition of organizations has been collaborating for over two years with children in working situations in 14 countries, supporting children’s advocacy efforts to improve their working conditions.¹⁷ They conducted a small

Regional Trends: Africa

Child participation actions taken forward in Africa largely respond to **distributing basic needs** such as sanitary kits, food and face masks. Children and young people are also **addressing misinformation about COVID**, supporting delivery of official and accurate information in isolated areas.

Children and young people are **addressing different forms of violence, but the ones that are common to most countries are gender-based violence, sexual violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation**. Children are creating awareness among their peers, and also educating adults. There have also been initiatives specifically looking to connect with **children in street situations**.

An important **challenge in the region has been adapting offline participation methods to the online environment**, given that Internet connection is limited to a sector of society. Children have been instrumental in bridging that gap, as those who do have access go out and reach children who don't in order to transmit the needed information. This has also applied to peer-to-peer mentoring interventions, which are very popular in the region. Also, going to look for children in their homes to bridge with the information transmitted online has been an entry point to preventing violence.

An important number of participation initiatives are addressing **digital safety training, as organizations have identified that because of COVID-19 many children are spending more time online**, or even going online for the first time. It's quite common that these examples are either part of or are complementing efforts towards bridging children with education and online learning.

study to assess how much the digital divide is affecting children's efforts in achieving positive change, and concluded that if children don't have access, they cannot take forward their advocacy activities, and are less likely of success.

In different parts of the world, **actions are being taken forward around child online protection, including digital safety and skills training**. A leading youth organization working with adolescents and young people identified that one of the biggest risks of adapting their offline participation models to online means was *"making assumptions about digital natives. The generation we're working with grew up online, but they don't know how to protect themselves. And for*

many of them today, they're often left alone to understand online dynamics".¹⁸

Ever since their online Jamboree "Joti Joti" in 2020, joined by thousands of adolescents from all over the world, the World Scouts Movement (WOSM) has seen a clear increase in online safety awareness. Children themselves have been asking for resources to share with their peers and coming up with messaging and ideas on how to help raise awareness around online safety. Through its "Safe from Harm" programme, WOSM has been a pioneer organization in providing their members around the globe with important resources.

In Bangladesh, Jordan, Malawi, Pakistan and Tunisia a youth-led digital skills movement¹⁹ has taught tens of thousands of young people to code (computer programming), and is active in empowering children by providing digital skills, with a focus on gender inclusiveness: *“We have created an online learning environment that is a mix of online content, self-learning, and hands-on coding exercises that are done in mini groups. We often let people borrow computers for the camps so they can participate from their homes when they do not have a computer”*.²⁰

A tech-coding organization founded by a 14-year-old girl in the Philippines²¹ is attempting to make the tech industry more gender inclusive and has now expanded to India, Kenya, Liberia, the United States and Vietnam. The organization sees a clear need for further training at a global level on digital safety and digital engagements, especially with girls.

Children are accessing knowledge and capacity-building around child online protection, they’re creating online communities and content, and they’re helping bridge communities with essential services, including preventing and reporting violence through online means. But being online is a technical requirement, so despite all the progress, the digital divide is posing great challenges within participation, as **those without access are excluded from realizing many of their rights.**

II.2. COVID-19: children and young people identify new ways and actions in a new, challenging world

“I don’t want to grow up in a society that doesn’t appreciate my role as a girl. My achievements may now be simple, but when I grow up, my achievements will grow with me, and society must allow me to realize my dreams and myself. Society has to be more just and more open to allow girls to drive and make a difference. I don’t want my ambition to stop at a routine job I do. I know that my dream today is impossible to achieve in this community, and traveling to another community may be a solution that helps realise the dream. But I think that changing our own community and developing it would be a better solution and will help a lot of girls like me.”

Jessica, 16, Lebanon²²

COVID-19 has impacted the world in unprecedented ways. And children’s exposure to increased risk of different forms of violence, along with children’s participation, are no exception. Global and national stakeholders have raised serious concerns about the risk of increased frequency and severity of VAC, alongside other forms of violence, during the COVID-19 pandemic”.²³ Experiences collected between April and November 2020 showed how **COVID-19 created the need for children and young people to adapt their participation and engagement approaches, and the issues being addressed. Peer interactions, socialization, entertainment, education, access to services and information, access to mental health support, and violence reporting**

lines have all been affected, to name just a few examples. Experiences also showed that despite the challenging environment, some children are being successful in being part of the solutions, by influencing decision makers, and working side by side with governments and civil society.

Confinement and lockdown have had an important impact on participation. Organizations have had to adapt many offline participation models to online channels, not always successfully. Furthermore, **due to the economic impacts of the pandemic, many children who used to be engaged in participation activities before COVID-19, have had to interrupt their involvement**, due to a need to prioritize supporting their families.

Due to confinement, **children have had to identify new ways of building peer networks**, a critical component of successful participation models. Where access to the Internet is widespread this has not been a major challenge, but where access is limited or not available, children have had their right to participation and protection affected. COVID-19 is posing critical challenges in safeguarding many children's rights.

With COVID-19 the role of technology within the wide spectrum of participation took an unexpected leap as many offline models were forced to be adapted online. Considering that approximately two thirds of the world are not online either on a regular basis or at all, the digital divide is creating a greater gap between children with and children without access to the Internet, and therefore to services. Since COVID-19 started, one organization working in Nepal,²⁴ identified that their biggest challenge has been taking

their offline models to the online world, after interrupting their activities for two months. *"The main reason why we work mostly offline is because children need a safe place, which has not been able to be replicated online".²⁵*

In most countries violence prevention and response services have been interrupted due to COVID-19. *"Case management and home visits for children and women at risk of abuse are among the most commonly disrupted services".²⁶* Online means are often a way of bridging or mitigating the absence of these services. Unfortunately, this affects the most vulnerable children disproportionately, so when access to the Internet is not available, services simply disappear.

COVID has also presented more opportunities for children to connect with decision makers at a regional and global level, opening the door for more and better collaboration at higher levels: *"More children are able to be part of global discussions, as they don't need to travel, be out of school, worry about visas, chaperones etc. Budget-wise this is also more cost effective, and they are able to participate at global level discussions".²⁷* Children have been able to advocate to have their rights respected, present how their lives have been affected by the pandemic, and put forward possible solutions directly to decision makers.

In times of COVID-19, children and young people are directly and indirectly addressing other children's mental health needs, by creating online - and where possible offline - gatherings and connections to share feelings, emotions, and experiences around the pandemic, with special focus on lockdown and confinement. Peer-to-peer support has gained a new additional meaning with

Regional Trends: Asia and the Pacific

In Asia, examples evidence that children are **sharing information related to COVID-19 with their peers** through online and offline means, they're participating in COVID-19 related webinars, and having online dialogue with decision makers where connection is available. Also, training and workshops on media literacy and journalism seem to be quite popular, as are peer mentoring programmes empowering children to educate adults. Organizations working with children seem to have a good connection with their audiences, which allows for these actions to be taken forward.

Although children and adolescents are addressing different forms of violence, sexual violence, child abuse, and domestic violence seem to be the ones with the highest number of actions to prevent and respond to them. Online safety and online violence are also being addressed in this region, but on a lesser scale. Organizations in this region are looking to respond holistically to multiple needs, both from the provision of services to being able to directly support children in accessing help and support: *"CRC Asia's member organizations have direct work with children. Their services vary and include providing helplines, online counselling, raising awareness on important safety measures against COVID-19 by making information available in local dialects, and also lobbying for inclusion and services for marginalized populations of children and their communities"*.²⁸

In multiple countries, organizations are looking to encourage children's empowerment in decision-making by better understanding the multiple challenges they face, whether through weekly self-reporting done by adolescent girls in a few countries, or by directly consulting children on what prevents them from meaningful participation.

Actions vary slightly in countries in South Asia. Children and adolescents are also supporting bridge communities with accurate information on COVID-19, but access to connectivity is a challenge in many countries.

Children's mental health is also being addressed across countries in South Asia, whether through home visits, or national awareness-raising campaigns. Social media is also being used to reach children. Specific pages are created for children to drop questions, comments about COVID-19, support their peers, and connect with decision makers. These are also spaces to take forward child centered social accountability online.

COVID-19: children have experienced and are aware of the effects of isolation, and they're taking forward actions to mitigate them. But these gatherings might not be able to respond to in-depth mental health needs, and experiences show that children are requesting more support. Children included mental health assistance as a recommendation on how to approach another pandemic, including *"special attention to children with special difficulties (such as*

obsessive compulsive disorder or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) by creating coping mechanisms to help them with anxiety levels." They pointed out the example of *"Bangladesh, where the government launched a helpline for children's mental health"*.²⁹

In Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Spain, Paraguay and Peru, a girl's adolescent-led



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organization³⁰ activated “Juntas en Cuarentena” (Together in Quarantine) to connect around how they’re experiencing confinement, including their experiences on gender-based violence, mental health, body shaming, and gender rights. Their gatherings connected over 600 girls who learned that *“it didn’t matter where they were, their experiences and problems were all the same”*. This created a solid sense of belonging among the girls but has also raised the need for their network to start addressing violence reporting and mental health support, for which they are reaching out for adult commitment and support.

In Georgia,³¹ children’s mental health needs came out as part of the “Tell your leader” campaign, which resulted in the government working directly with schools to raise awareness on the importance of mental health care. In Sierra Leone³² youth leaders are receiving mental health training, psychological first aid, and violence reporting. They go back to their communities with the goal of helping children.

In Colombia, Kenya, India, and the United States,³³ an organization has mainstreamed mental health and well-being through youth-serving systems and community organizations so that young people can receive support through easy-to-reach structures. They have identified that for youth and adolescents the key people needed to engage in delivering support are peers, families, educators, and youth workers.

In Uganda,³⁴ a local organization – building on their peer-to-peer structures – has helped children prevent depression due to experiences of isolation and domestic violence: *“Through our peer-to-peer mentoring programme, we managed to solve several cases of anxiety as many children, especially girls, were really worried that they had grown old and had to repeat classes”*.

In Uruguay³⁵ a different model of peer support was launched through the digital challenge #MiFórmula (#MyFormula), which encouraged adolescents to share with their peers, their strategies to combat isolation.

With COVID-19, many child protection interventions - including those around participation and engagement - had to be adapted to online channels, and children have assisted adults in identifying innovative

approaches for doing so. Some have managed to adapt their models digitally, others have been able to combine both, while others have had to identify ways of reaching children in vulnerable settings through other channels such as phones and radios.

Participation models that relied on offline and face-to-face engagement have been able to adapt parts of their training models digitally, with a small number of adolescent leaders going back to their offline communities and sharing their new skills with their peers.

This has taken place in countries in Africa and South Asia: capacity-building relying on a cascading effect. In terms of benefits, it is more cost-effective (compared to in-person workshops), and a very empowering experience for those adolescents that can access these trainings, given that they're tasked with training their peers and coming back with their questions and comments. The shortcoming is that capacity-building is limited to those who have access to the Internet, data, good connectivity, and digital knowledge. In fact, a few examples from countries in Africa and Latin America show how some organizations are directly providing devices or transferring funds through their partner organizations so children can pay for connectivity.

Radio is being used by children to disseminate their messages, specifically in countries in Africa, where special efforts are being taken forward to reach the hardest to reach. "In South Sudan,³⁶ to make sure that those without access to a radio set will listen, speakers mounted on moto-taxis are touring strategic locations in hard-to-reach populations in Juba". In Rwanda and Malawi³⁷ girls have been reaching millions

through national radio shows. In Rwanda, girl journalists interviewed a spokesperson from Rwanda Biomedical Center and produced a six-minute package about the COVID-19 pandemic and how to stay safe for Radio Rwanda - a national station that reaches 98% of the population.

COVID-19 is bringing children and adults together in building back better.

#CovidUnder19,³⁸ a civil society organization-led initiative, supported by the Office of the SRSG-VAC, brought together children, child human rights activists, academia and other stakeholders, to understand children's experiences due to COVID-19, and together develop responses to these issues. During May and June 2020, almost 30,000 children from all geographical regions provided their views and experiences on how their rights were respected during the pandemic through a jointly developed questionnaire, grounded in a child-rights based approach. In August, a group of 80 children from different countries participated in a six-weeks long virtual camp, where they analyzed the results and identified education and safety and protection as the most critical issues for them to focus on during the recovery phase of the pandemic. The group has activated child and adult led collective advocacy, looking to include children in building back better.

"In order to participate and exercise our rights, the support of adults is very important. When we try to advocate by ourselves it's harder. But when we have their support it's easier, as they even help us prepare more."
Diana, 17, Bolivia, #COVIDUnder19

II.3. Children taking action to bring about VAC: roles and means to take forward change

“In a world that seems divided and stricken with hate and injustice, it’s hard to believe that you can find a cause that transcends and unites people across continents. It is indeed commonplace that there are families and friends just like yours, of varying colours and cultures, who are willing to have their voice heard, and are ready to join the fight for humanity’s common future and our today. Together, as one. Our battle cry is lighting up the heavens as we race for a better tomorrow.”

Grace, 16, Kenya³⁹

The different experiences reviewed in this report show that **children are taking actions to support efforts to prevent, report and address different forms of violence**. Children are directly collaborating with decision makers and adult leaders through inter-generational dialogues, and other institutional and non-institutional spaces. They’re supporting their peers, reaching out to them, and connecting with essential services. Children are also expressing themselves through art and using similar means to support victims of violence. Overall, children are proving to be agents of change, and that they’re effective in collaborating with adults, other children, and youth.

II.3. a) Children working side by side with decision makers

“I think we have to rethink what we are today!! The world should be aware that today’s children are more mature and aware than before and that we have demands and rights. We no longer want to be considered as minors with no opinion, so that we can implement what the adults decide only!! Today, I have my own choices, like my friends, what I wear, how to spend my time, the music I listen to, and my food, but that’s not enough!! My future is also my choice and I have every right to be a partner in the making and deciding.”

Ramy, 16, Syria⁴⁰

A growing trend is children partnering with adults and increasing their level of engagement. **Partnership relationships provide an opportunity to channel efforts in a positive and constructive manner, and to include children as part of the solution. When provided with a safe space and conditions to influence decision-making, children take it.** They work and collaborate with adults, they recommend ways forward, follow on commitments, take action towards building a world free of violence, and reaffirm their civic engagement.

“We can do more. We know we can do more. Just listen to us. Children can influence change.”

Cheverly, 17, Philippines⁴¹

When children are empowered by decision makers and governments, and are invited to interact with them, children take action towards addressing violence. This can be through institutional and non-institutional means, but always encouraging children’s

Regional Trends: Europe

In Europe, child-led actions are mostly around children engaging with other peers, children reaching out to other children to collect information and their experiences of the pandemic, **peer-to-peer support around mental health to cope with the lockdown, child-led advocacy aimed at decision makers, and digital safety and well-being**. There's also a wider use of technology to support children's meaningful participation.

Specifically regarding violence, actions are addressing online violence (how to prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse [CSEA] and other forms of online violence, like hate speech and cyberbullying), **child trafficking, domestic violence, and violence faced by specific groups like children deprived of liberty, children under attack, refugees and migrants, and LGBTIQ+ groups**.

In Ukraine,⁴² *"marking the first Day to Protect Education from Attack children were able to exchange their ideas on safe and quality education with government officials. The round table turned into an open platform where boys and girls had their say, asked questions on the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, and received insights from the Ministry of Education on the current work and future plans"*.

In this region, **child-led advocacy has specifically stood out through online interactions with decision makers**. In Kosovo,⁴³ children have taken part in debates with authorities, and drafting advocacy messages. Also, other countries have specifically created instances for children to put their questions forward regarding COVID-19 and government response.

Children are actively addressing the challenges posed by online education, including spending longer periods of time online.

civic engagement and confidence in achieving positive change. **If provided with a safe and encouraging environment, children have shown their ability to make recommendations, demonstrating profound knowledge regarding the issues that affect them.**

In Malawi,⁴⁴ a group of girls helped change national legislation by uniting voices to outlaw child marriage and other forms of sexual violence. In Guatemala,⁴⁵ a group of girls led the process of creating a national violence observatory center to report cases of violence against girls and women.

In Kosovo,⁴⁶ children have taken part in debates with authorities, drafting advocacy messages towards *"participation in local*

budgetary planning; equal educational opportunities for all children; better health care (budgetary lines for transport for children suffering from serious illnesses), and others".⁴⁷

In Iceland, legislative and policy proposals to promote children's prosperity published in September 2020 prioritized the active involvement of children. Children's views on the proposals were sought by means of a wide-ranging consultation. The proposals also contain provisions that embed a rights-based and participatory approach, including through: incorporating child participation into mandatory child rights impact assessments of legislation and policy initiatives; increasing knowledge and capacity on child rights and child participation within public bodies; a

consultation forum for children and public bodies; and a consultation portal to ensure children have access to child-friendly information regarding government initiatives and can easily express their opinions on them.

In line with their right to participate in decisions and matters affecting them, children are monitoring the delivery of decision makers' promises, requesting commitments and action. This has been possible when adults have provided the necessary child-friendly resources to empower children with skills and knowledge to take forward their own child-led processes. Organizations have pointed out that when providing capacity-building, children have connected theoretical concepts with previous actions taken forward by themselves and their peers: *"although they hadn't been trained on the theory, they realized they had been taking forward advocacy for a while now. They had learned from their own actions and from their peers, but they didn't know that was called advocacy"*.⁴⁸

Children are becoming more active in being part of the solution, including in the SDG implementation processes. The Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) presented in 2020 during the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development included a variety of examples of children's engagement in processes to develop the VNRs and in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Consultations, meetings and surveys to receive inputs from children for the VNR were highlighted, as well as moves to establish more permanent systems of engaging them in national decision-making.⁴⁹

Regarding the inclusion of children in VNR processes, Austria highlighted lowering

voting age to 16 to encourage the political participation and engagement of young people; Kenya reported on primary schools organizing SDGs Clubs to create awareness among students; Mozambique noted that surveys and consultations with children were used as input to the VNR; North Macedonia, Moldova and Russia reported on young people's networks that are actively promoting the SDGs. Permanent national consultation structures were also created to consult children: National VNR Taskforce (Gambia); Agenda 2030 Youth Group (Finland); the Youth Council (Slovenia), the national Youth Council, and Action Committee on Children (Solomon Islands). Countries including Bulgaria, Slovenia and Uganda used online surveys to reach out to children and young people to hear their thoughts on national development.

The office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children produced a brief on *'How to Highlight Promising Practices to End Violence against Children in VNR Preparation and Presentation'*⁵⁰ (English, Arabic) to assist Member States in their preparation for the VNR reports, including children's engagement in the process.

II.3. b) Intergenerational dialogues to eradicate violence against children and accelerate SDGs - Children and adults coming up with solutions together

"Age doesn't define maturity. Sometimes children are more mature than adults and that should be understood. Because we are children we are not heard but adults must understand that sometimes we understand much better than they do."
Girl, 14, Costa Rica⁵¹

Mapping results showed interesting initiatives where **children and adults engage in constructive intergenerational dialogues, with children accessing further knowledge through positive exchange of information with subject experts, while putting forward queries and ideas.** In Bolivia, the State of Palestine and Israel⁵² children have taken part in ongoing inter-generational dialogues, which have been instrumental for shaping programmes. Also, these instances have encouraged countries to learn from other countries' experiences: In Bolivia, for example, these exchanges have already been used to take forward child-led advocacy, and their methodologies have been replicated in Israel and the State of Palestine, where the groups are still at very early stages.



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In regard to violence and protection, **children are turning to adult experts to learn about issues they're interested in, and if done in a child-friendly manner, they welcome these as they can be used to bring about change.** In the Philippines,⁵³ due to a series of incidents around gender-based violence - including two girls who were victims of sexual violence and murdered - girls have mobilized and reached out to adult experts for technical training and support to further understand the root causes of violence. After these dialogues, girls have been able to shape and take forward advocacy campaigns, given their better understanding of the topic before coming up with solutions: *"If you have a very narrow understanding of the issue, you'll also have a narrow understanding of how change can happen".*⁵⁴

In Canada, the Middle East, South Africa and India,⁵⁵ children have connected digitally with multiple experts, from UN representatives, to researchers and government officials, to present problems faced by them and their peers, and understand how these connect to local and global issues: *"We have been able to make the children aware about the challenges they face in their communities and then take actions. Many of these children have led pilot projects in their communities on environmental protection, peace, protection from sexual assault and prevention of child marriage".*⁵⁶

Intergenerational learning goes both ways: adults are also learning from successful child-led actions. For example, in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Spain, Panama, Peru and Venezuela,⁵⁷ 'Tremendas' an adolescent-led movement created content for 10-to-12-year-olds around gender-based violence (GBV) and

gender rights. The project was so successful in creating awareness and educating around GBV, that adult-led organizations and local governments requested 'Tremendas' to adapt their methodology to be replicated with adult audiences.

Inter-generational approaches have also been applied during COVID-19: In Europe and Africa,⁵⁸ at the beginning of the pandemic, elected student representatives, along with young activists from marginalized communities, including former child laborers, co-created the Justice for Every Child campaign calling for global financial commitments to fund and deliver targeted interventions to protect the almost 20% of children living on \$2 dollars or less per day from the short- and medium-term impacts of COVID-19. *"The youth-initiated Justice for Every Child campaign now has over 50 youth-led partner organizations, ranging from international networks, national bodies and local grassroots groups tackling the impact of the pandemic on the frontlines in refugee camps, informal settlements and rural villages"*.⁵⁹

II.3. c) Children taking actions in their communities

"Leaders of the world: the next time you lockdown the world, please put aside just a little bit of money aside to help families who can no longer help themselves."
Cute, 16, Zimbabwe⁶⁰

Globally, **children and adolescents are proving to be agents of change who can come up with solutions and take concrete actions to address VAC and other pressing issues in their communities.** In Jordan

and Uganda⁶¹ girls aged 9 to 14 from very marginalized communities go through educational training and then a solutions lab where they put forward their ideas as part of 'Girls as drivers of change'. In Uganda over 1000 girls have gone through these experiences, and in Jordan the program has worked mostly with Syrian girls, who in collaboration with local women leaders ideate and present solutions to specific problems affecting them. Girls improve their approaches and once finalized they can apply for funding to implement their solution. *"The best way to end VAC is to put money in the hands of people who are experiencing the violence because they will know how to fix the problem"*.⁶²

In many countries, children are being trained on how to support data collection efforts and to identify the issues mostly affecting their communities. **Children are collecting information about other children, benefiting from their direct access to their peers in the field.** This has been extremely important in times of COVID-19, given that because of the pandemic, organizations are often not able to have a presence on the ground, and children have been instrumental in reaching their peers.

In Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Romania, and Sierra Leone,⁶³ children are being trained in data collection efforts, which also has proven to be an **empowering experience, as their contributions are acknowledged, and they share a sense of belonging by connecting with others.** In Scotland,⁶⁴ children themselves launched an online survey to collect other children's recommendations during the pandemic.

In Sierra Leone,⁶⁵ a youth-led organization deployed a team of 25 adolescent volunteers for a week-long communication and social mobilization research exercise. The exercise aimed at assessing the compliance levels of small business holders with the COVID-19 preventive and control measures within their business environment and to promote the increased knowledge and understanding of the public about the COVID 19 disease.

Children are also helping bridge essential services in their communities, including reporting violence. In Bolivia⁶⁶, child advisory committees for local governments act as bridge-builders on protection issues between children victim of violence and the ombudsperson. *“Children report, draft messages, visit schools. These committees go through protection training at the beginning of their advisory period”*.⁶⁸ In Bangladesh, India, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda and the United States,⁶⁹ girls created an app to interview other girls and identify - amongst other things - the reasons why violence reporting systems were not being successful. Technology Enabled Girl Ambassadors (TEGA) have so far conducted 17,000 interviews, informing a variety of programmes regarding GBV that have impacted 18 million girls and their communities.

In Uganda,⁶⁹ it was reported to a non-governmental organization that girls were being victims of sexual abuse by their teachers. Through organized peer networks, Girl Guides had been in touch with these girl victims, yet with confinement regular communication was a challenge. To address this, a number of girls were tasked with the responsibility of being group leaders and asked to periodically get in touch with the

victims’ parents, in order to guide them in making sure these cases were properly reported.

Children and young people are also supporting efforts by identifying new actors in violence reporting lines, when services have been disrupted. In Argentina, South Africa and the Philippines⁷⁰ the informal work sector has grown since the beginning of the pandemic. One example is cosmetic representatives who visit households offering their products. Girls are training these representatives on violence and gender inequalities, so they’re equipped to detect both gender-based-violence and violence against children. *“Women and children see them constantly, as they’re always the same home visitors. They now have the knowledge to offer referrals and advice”*.⁷¹

Children are supporting efforts around delivering accurate information related to COVID-19, fighting misinformation and helping keep their communities safe. Some organizations have pointed out that where children have access to the Internet, they can be instrumental in delivering trustworthy information. Children who are in touch with adults can help bridge gaps and bring relevant information to their communities. *“Children are mostly taking actions to raise awareness. They’re generally more educated than their parents and have literacy to deliver accurate information. We have also seen actions from children towards the more vulnerable and hardest to reach. They identify these cases, target them, and deliver accurate information around health and protection”*.⁷²

In Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the State of Palestine and Syria,⁷³ young leaders in the

Regional Trends: The Middle East

In the Middle East, **child-led research and reporting specifically stand out**, given that organizations' have had to limit their presence in the field, and children have access to other children. In some cases, these efforts respond to children as human rights defender programmes.

With regard to violence against children, children are addressing **the needs of children in street situations, sexual and domestic violence, and violence inside refugee settings**, amongst others. Children are contributing to **peacebuilding processes**, and they're also supporting the delivery of basic needs and accurate information about COVID-19. In Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the State of Palestine and Syria, youth leaders in the medical fields filmed a video explaining to children the context of the pandemic. The video contained practical steps of how to stay safe. Overall, 5000 children were reached and encouraged to share the information with their communities.⁷⁴

In the region, there have been important efforts to adapt offline models to the online space, and to continue engagement despite confinement. In Lebanon, an organization⁷⁵ has continued its work with 'child champions', despite restrictions due to confinement: *"These champions are mapping out local tensions emerging in relation to COVID-19 and working with 'Search for Common Ground' to design strategic communications activities to address them. In addition, this champions' network was mobilized to deliver a rapid response on COVID-19 and related tensions both online and in their communities"*.

Children, adolescents and youth are raising awareness around violence against children in refugee camps, through workshops where **children are first trained on violence against children, and then they are the ones to educate adults back in their communities.**⁷⁶

medical fields filmed a video explaining the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The video reached 5000 children and contained practical steps of how to stay safe, including mental health.

In the Central African Republic, Mali and South Sudan,⁷⁷ through adolescent-led radio shows children are providing reliable information, by placing large speakers in isolated areas.

"People don't respect the measures imposed by the authorities because of the rumors circulating that COVID-19 disease is a lie. We need to convince people of its existence through the testimonies of those affected."
Abel, Mali⁷⁸

In Uganda, an organization implemented a COVID-19 emergency relief fund on child safeguarding during lockdown and have involved 12 adolescent girls in developing strategies for sensitizing 6 villages on VAC, sexual and reproductive health rights challenges faced by girls and providing information on COVID-19 preparedness.⁷⁹ In Cambodia,⁸⁰ children are raising awareness by producing short videos on handwashing and prevention of COVID-19 information. They share the videos with their social media groups, but also through a local child and young people network on children's rights. In Yemen,⁸¹ children are helping deliver accurate information by visiting isolated households.

II.3. d) Peer-to-peer connections: children reach and support each other, address violence with other children

“The most powerful thing about our work is when we work with each other. When we realize that we don’t necessarily have to look “up” to find role models: these can easily be in your classroom. There’s a different level of connection, and different kinds of trust”. Marina, 16, Argentina⁸²

An important trend in participation is the different uses and benefits of peer engagement. Children engage with other children in all areas of their lives and, in general, trust other children or young people. Child participation, empowerment, and civic engagement are no exception: children bring about change with their peers, and they help scale up programmes. An adolescent led network active in 12 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean⁸³ has resulted in a permanent support system between peers: *“When there have been cases of violence, they are empowered to educate one another on violence not being normal. Beyond the advocacy work they take forward, the network itself is their support. Peers help their peers by telling them that what they’re experiencing is not normal: they open each other’s eyes. They exchange WhatsApp numbers and monitor each other. The interaction between different cultures inside the region is also an entry point to sharing experiences that support the idea of violence not being normal. When they are able to see other realities and see the world through their peers’ eyes, they’re also able to see solutions”*.⁸⁴

Peer-to-peer models can be effective means towards promoting meaningful engagement.

Children reach other children, they encourage and support each other, and they understand each other’s needs. Children can provide other children with understanding and a supportive environment, while building solid emotional connections. This is particularly relevant for children who are victims of violence, since their peers can act as positive role models or as bridge-builders with reporting means. Peer interactions also reinforce children’s feelings of safety and wellbeing.

Children often organize themselves around common goals, and they are aware of the benefits of peer interactions when taking forward change:

- They provide direct support to one another, including when in distress;
- They help each other identify problems affecting them and their communities;
- They collectively look to understand the root causes of violence;
- They get together to come up with solutions around multiple issues;
- They coordinate themselves to become organized through student councils or advisory committees for government bodies;
- They draft recommendations;
- They create resources for their peers, such as advocacy guides or recommendations for preventing violence;
- They mentor and educate their peers and inform the adult community.

In 18 countries,⁸⁵ children in working situations have organized children’s advisory committees (CAC) meeting on a regular basis for two years, to advocate to improve working conditions for themselves and their

peers. *“Children’s regular participation in groups, interactions with other children, use of participatory analysis and action planning tools, as well as encouragement and support from NGO facilitators increased the confidence of many CAC members to speak up in public settings to express their views, experiences and advocacy messages. Thereby their participation also contributed to the improvement of children’s relationships to their peers, their families, their teachers and their community”.*⁸⁶ As stated by one CAC member from Tanzania, *“We now feel rather being relatives than friends”.*⁸⁷

Despite confinement and lockdown children are finding the way to stay in touch, reach



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the hardest to reach, and support each other. Children are connecting around common experiences of the pandemic, they are developing innovative ways to stay in touch, they are creating communities around specific issues that affect them, they are supporting each other in preventing and responding to different forms of violence, and they are aware of the need to stay in touch with one another. Experiences show that children have increased the rate of their peer engagements.

In the United Kingdom a theater company working with a small group of adolescents on taking forward change through drama, encouraged adolescents to document their experiences, which led to 3000 adolescents from 16 other countries⁸⁸ to contribute their experiences of the pandemic, resulting in a time capsule of experiences of lockdown founded on peer engagement.

“The Coronavirus Time Capsule has pushed me to stay creative and keep making connections with the outside world. It’s allowed me to be part of something bigger than myself. Getting together with other young people in different places has been the best part of it. It’s really important for young people to have their voices heard and right now we’re in a position where I feel like we should be able to make decisions about the things that affect us. The Time Capsule gave me a space to speak up in lockdown.”
Kezia, 16, United Kingdom.

Such projects have also triggered new ways of creating collectiveness, a sense of community between peers, and common advocacy goals: *“First children feel like part of a community, and then they’re empowered*

to start reflecting about the kind of world they'd like to live in. If we want children to have a strong say in building back better, they need to feel safe and the complicity of their peers".⁸⁹

In many instances, due to COVID-19 and its impact, and recognizing the need for action, children have intensified their engagement. In Hungary,⁹⁰ children in detention centers who are part of an organization's advisory board used to meet once a month. With the

pandemic they have asked to meet every two weeks instead. They have become involved in other projects, providing inputs on other issues related to safety and wellbeing. In the Romanian chapter of this project, children also increased the frequency of their meetings, and have received training on restorative justice, public speaking, and children's rights in general.

In Brazil,⁹¹ children and adolescents are participating in virtual gatherings to

Regional Trends: Latin America and the Caribbean

Actions taken forward by children and adolescents in this region are evidencing children's empowerment when tackling violence and other issues.

"It's essential to empower adolescents and children. We don't want to be spectators of change, we want to be protagonists of a society that changes and deconstructs itself to form an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future". Julieta, Chile, 17⁹²

Children in Latin America are **sharing stories about the pandemic, they're activating awareness-raising campaigns on the impact of COVID, and they're working directly with decision makers reviewing budgets, making recommendations, and advising on protection related programmes and policies.** Children are also **creating peer communities that support one another, developing advocacy and communication resources.**

Gender-based violence and adolescent pregnancy, gang violence, child labor and online violence are among the most prominent issues in the region. Children are also addressing the effects of confinement, with specific focus on **mental health and domestic violence.** In Panama, an adolescent-led organization⁹³ works with children and adolescents, specifically targeting gang violence: *"We, the young adolescents, can create great changes in our community and we are demonstrating it through this youth movement, preventing more adolescents from being part of the more than 40 gangs that exist in the province and sending a clear message to our authorities that prevention is always the best option".*

In Bolivia each municipality is requested to have a child advisory board. An organization⁹⁴ has been working with children to support activating these committees, and they have noted that with COVID, children have increasingly seen opportunities to organize themselves. They requested the organization to have more meetings, and to date they've been able to activate 44% of these committees nationally.

Throughout the region, children are putting recommendations forward around COVID-19, and developing resources for their peers. In 12 countries in the region,⁹⁵ adolescents from "Con Causa" have put together an advocacy guide for other adolescents to use. The guide was developed entirely from their own past advocacy experiences.

discuss issues related to both physical and psychological violence, and collectively suggest strategies to prevent violence. They are also producing podcasts and videos to encourage other children to exercise preventive and safety measures in their day to day lives.

Children have access to their peers and adults often rely on that, which has been instrumental during confinement, specifically when it comes to reaching those who don't have Internet access, children in street situations, and generally those hardest to reach. *"An important element of participation today is accessibility: children have access to other children, whether physically or through social media. These relationships are not mediated by adults, it's just children to children. That's the key element of engagement. Because always someone will be excluded, we need to tap into all our available resources to reach the most vulnerable".⁹⁶*

Experiences showed that children find ways to connect to their peers, whether through the household's phone, through radio, or physically looking for them. *"From the informal settlements in Liberia to the poorer districts in Peru, this peer-to-peer interaction has been instrumental in not only providing connection in a time of isolation for many, but in these youth-led groups formulating advocacy demands (the primary role of groups) based on the real life experiences of COVID-19 for their marginalized peers".⁹⁷* Organizations have also acknowledged that children are successful in transmitting information to other children. But it has also been noted that as part of these processes, children rely on adults to provide them with the needed information to be transferred to others.

"Students and pupils want to once again be interacting and keeping up with each other. Therefore, they've long thought it fit that they become the precursors in order to combat the fight against COVID-19. They've done and are still doing sensitization, one-to-one sensitizing their friends, classmates, school mates, peers and whomever they get in touch with. They've been on the air making their voices heard to the public about COVID-19 and telling them to please abide by the preventive measures set aside by the WHO. They're also writing articles, poems and other writeups, all about COVID-19. These and many more have been done by students and pupils, so finally, everyone will be free and happy."
Samuel, 16, Sierra Leone⁹⁸

Children are creating communities and support systems. They value each other, and their peers' opinions. In Serbia,⁹⁹ an organization working with children in detention centers activated child advisory boards. Amongst other things children have increased their knowledge about their rights in criminal proceedings and contributed to capacity-building programmes and awareness raising campaigns. Beyond these groups' tangible outcomes, children have expressed how these interaction spaces with peers are, more importantly, a space for them to feel less lonely, find support, and access equals to engage with.

In India, an organization¹⁰⁰ works with street-connected children,¹⁰¹ trains them as peer leaders responsible for informing their street-connected peers, and for researching their needs and vulnerabilities. They have visited communities and trained other children on sanitization, and have reached out to their peers to support when being victims of VAC.

*“The street champions conducted a quick survey during the onset of pandemic, which has thrown light upon the mental health conditions of the street connected children as well as instances of abuse faced due to the onset of lockdown”.*¹⁰²

In Panama,¹⁰³ a child-led group works on helping prevent violence by encouraging their peers not to join street gangs in their communities. They work on developing different cultural, educational, and personal development activities in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development.

In Bangladesh and the Philippines¹⁰⁴ the programme ‘Ticket to life’ helps bring street children into Scouts groups. Adolescents and young people reach out to children in street situations to help them enrol in school. These children are becoming group leaders now, and the programme will be expanded to other countries, primarily in Africa.

Children are also helping provide referrals when needed, informing other children about existing violence reporting mechanisms. In Spain,¹⁰⁵ a national child helpline that has been active for 27 years has seen how influential peer support is when it comes to preventing and reporting violence: *“A significant majority gets to know the helpline when referred to it by a friend. This means that children are aware of their friends’ support needs: children talk. They don’t have much support, but those who support them the most are their friends and peers”.* In Chile,¹⁰⁶ a digital chat-based helpline for children victims of violence and discrimination, which focuses in (but not limited to) LGBT+ communities, states that most children are referred to the helpline by a friend or peer in a similar situation. The helpline supports close to 3000 children annually.

In Guatemala,¹⁰⁷ an adolescent-led organization started a campaign called ‘Cuéntalo’ (Tell someone about it), founded on a ‘girls helping girls approach’. Their goal is to encourage other girls to speak up about sexual violence, so they can learn that sexual violence is not normal.

In 12 countries¹⁰⁸ in Latin America and the Caribbean an adolescent network created to put forward solutions for meeting the SDGs resulted in a permanent support system for children: *“When there have been cases of violence they are empowered to educate one another on violence not being normal. Beyond the advocacy work they take forward, the network itself is their support. Peers help their peers by telling them that what they’re experiencing is not normal: they open each other’s eyes. The interaction between different cultures inside the region is also an entry point to sharing experiences that support the idea of violence not being normal. When they are able to see other realities and see the world through their peers’ eyes, they’re also able to see solutions”.*¹⁰⁹ This same network drafted an advocacy guide targeting other adolescents. The guide relied solely on what they learned from their past experiences taking forward change.

Another trend between peers is knowledge transfer: children and adolescents are mentoring and training each other, and they are also learning from their peers. This applies to knowledge sharing courses and capacity-building sessions where adults have critical roles as facilitators, and to learning together from past participation and empowerment experiences.

In Bangladesh, India, and Syria¹¹⁰ children are educating their peers and also their parents on sexual violence and child marriage: *“we learnt that the children (boys and girls) in these areas face violence. Most of them are not aware of their rights and assume these kinds of violence are a part of their normal lives. Our first step has been to conduct extensive workshops to spread awareness. We tell them how to avoid these situations and places, to go in groups and to report it immediately to their parents (in case they are not the perpetrators) and to our workshop leaders, as well as educate them about the differences between good touch and bad touch. The children are now leading our workshops, teaching their peers, using art and drama to explain these types of violence and what one should do as countermeasures. In this way, they are able to open up and share their own stories without having any stigma attached to it. In the second stage, we invite their parents to these workshops where the children take the lead in engaging and educating their parents. Some of the children are so traumatized that they don’t talk to their parents, but they do open up during our workshops as they interact with others their age”*.¹¹¹

In the Netherlands,¹¹² child rights organizations have been assisting children and young people in awareness raising and campaigns to educate their peers and local community on the issue of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

In Argentina, Chile, Malaysia and South Africa,¹¹³ adolescent girls go through six-weeks extensive advocacy and communications training, including identifying the problems that affect them in regard to gender-based violence. Then

they go to their communities and train groups of younger girls, so they can together develop advocacy campaigns. Training and campaigning happen through peer-to-peer engagement, and cascades information and learnings.

II.3. e) Children expressing themselves through art and other means to help prevent and respond to VAC

“The response to our Time Capsule makes me feel reassured because with everything that’s going there are still people who care what we have to say. It’s our generation next who’s going to be in charge of what happens in our world and even though we are mainly controlled by adults it’s our world as well so it’s nice to know that people still care about what we think.”

Allegresse, 14, United Kingdom¹¹⁴

Art, crafts, and other means of expression empower children to address violence, recover and move forward, when being victims of violence. Whether they are girl victims of sexual violence or children in conflict zones who have lost their loved ones, such methods trigger a healing process by connecting with creativity and expression.

In Honduras,¹¹⁵ a child-led intervention uses drama to help prevent GBV, a critical problem faced by girls in the country: *“In response to this problem that Honduran youth experience daily, we are generating a positive impact in the communities of Honduras to ensure that women, girls and young people can prevent different forms of violence. Our work focuses on using theatre to transmit why it is important to report, raise voices, seek justice, so as not to continue being victims”*.¹¹⁶

In Guatemala,¹¹⁷ a girls-led organization works with adolescent mothers who have been victims of violence to find recovery through crafts and simple jewelry making while working together on their self-esteem and personal growth, to help with their re-insertion in society. In India,¹¹⁸ an organization organized a poster making competition with the aim of encouraging children to describe the different forms and nature of domestic violence, how to recognize it, and how to raise their voices against it. The winning posters were then used to raise awareness among a wider population.

In Luxembourg,¹¹⁹ an organization aiming to promote a safer, more responsible and more

positive use of digital technology among children and young people invited children to draw something they think should not be shared on the Internet. Over half of children consulted drew violent and scary scenes, followed by sexually related drawings.

Through art, technology, writing, and other means, children express their feelings, hopes, fears, and in some cases their experiences regarding violence in times of COVID-19. Children are documenting the pandemic, their lives and experiences, they're finding commonalities across borders, they're reflecting upon violence and protection, they're putting forward recommendations, and they're helping to raise awareness.

Over 150 children¹²⁰ from different regions participated in a virtual exhibition, through an interactive website featuring what children had to say about how COVID-19 impacted their lives, including paintings, videos, articles, audio clips and recommendations on moving forward. In 16 countries¹²¹ over 3000 adolescents documented their experience of the pandemic to create a time capsule. Adult leaders of this initiative have seen how drama and documenting children's experience of the pandemic have given children a sense of belonging, and a new connection with other adolescents living in other countries.





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“Being able to create something as short and simple as a 30-second video with someone across the world was eye-opening, to say the least. Personally, the experience went beyond exchanging recipes. It allowed me and a lot of my peers to take a step into a different side of the reality that is the pandemic going on today and realize that we are all experiencing the same things. It’s often easy to remain in our own little bubble and forget the reality that there is more around us than our daily familiarity. The power in collaborating with students who are different but alike has immensely diversified my thoughts and judgments.”

Gabrielle, 17, Kenya¹²²

In different countries¹²³ children’s poems and illustrations have been used to put together stories about positiveness. Similar examples were implemented in Guatemala, Venezuela and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Somalia children used radio to share how their lives have been affected by COVID-19. In the State of Palestine¹²⁴ children produced videos of their experiences, and also shared messages with other children. In Bangladesh, India, Malawi, Nigeria, and the United States,¹²⁵ a number of girls in each country self-reported weekly through videos answering a set of 10 questions each week, aiming to find commonalities across borders.

Children are using different means to delve into specific issues within protection. In Senegal,¹²⁶ a group of girls requested adults to help them create a video on the impacts of COVID-19 on child marriage. In the Philippines, children put together posters to transmit solidarity messages around COVID-19. In Ecuador, music was used to help children overcome the sadness caused by losing close ones due to COVID-19. In different countries in Africa,¹²⁷ adolescents have been creating videos of the Jerusalema dance, *“to creatively raise awareness about the climate change emergency ensuring it’s not left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as calling on children and young people to protect creation”*.¹²⁸

Different forms of expression have also been used to encourage children to stay in touch to combat the effects of isolation. In Mali¹²⁹ children and adolescents took part in the CoronART Challenge, which invited youth and artists to express themselves in a one-minute free beat to help young people stay connected and promote creative expression.

When access to technology is available, creating content as a means of expression results as a very spontaneous process, according to a safe online space created for children under 13 years of age deployed in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States by the private sector. Particularly, the content created around gaming and recreational activities online stands out: *“This is the golden era for creativity for kids. There’s certainly a trend of derivative works from actual activities, and it’s growing significantly. Kids are creating a universe around a particular activity. You own it. You don’t need to master it to participate, and they’re creating content around it. They’re more empowered with confinement - as they’re spending more time online - and they feel they can contribute, and better understand the universe”*.¹³⁰

II.3. f) Children calling for peaceful, just and inclusive societies

“Children and adolescents are seen more as the problem and not possible solution providers. I think the adults should check on the children and adolescents and hear what they have to say and also guide them through meaningful participation.”
Sheldon, 17, Kenya¹³¹

Whether considered partners or not, children defend human rights, stand up for the rights of their peers, and get involved in peacebuilding processes. In different regions, children and young people are participating in peaceful protests as part of social movements of change, in Chile, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Lebanon, the United States, and others.

In Chile, Ghana, Malaysia and South Africa,¹³² after going through a six-week training on gender-based violence, human rights and national level advocacy, adolescent girls trained adults in their communities, marched to parliament, and presented petitions to government representatives. When given the tools, girls are leading and owning their advocacy campaigns: *“As a result of doing this process, they changed the petition of what girls can do. This attracted many new girls who wanted to join in after the campaign”*.¹³³

In Ukraine,¹³⁴ marking the first Day to Protect Education from Attack, children were able to exchange their ideas on safe and quality education with government officials. *“The round table turned into an open platform where boys and girls had their say, asked questions on the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, and received lots of insights from the Ministry of Education on the current work and future plans. Attending the government building and meeting the Vice-Prime Minister of Ukraine on Euro integration, children aspired to raise the question of safe schools in the governmental agenda”*.

In the State of Palestine,¹³⁵ as part of an organizations’¹³⁶ ‘child-led monitoring and reporting groups’, children in different governorates collected and analyzed data on child rights, drafted reports, developed initiatives and held accountability sessions with decision makers.

In Central African Republic, Mali and South Sudan¹³⁷ children in conflict zones use radio to raise their voices in the context of peace processes. The methodological approach has relied on involving them in the analysis

of the specific situations each community is going through. They take forward issues and audience research, review findings, and decide on angles to focus on. With COVID-19 this approach has been adapted to address children's concerns about the pandemic, given that it was a pressing demand from their peers and communities.

In Cameroon¹³⁸ a child-focused organization works with children in building their capacity as peace builders in their communities. They train girls to be community leaders, who then go out and reach out to school children, who are amongst the most marginalized. COVID-19 has meant major difficulties in reaching the children they work with, as they're not online and are in precarious situations. Efforts are being made connecting the girl leaders, and again cascade the information to children in vulnerable settings.

In Lebanon,¹³⁹ young champions are adapting their peacebuilding initiative by mapping local tensions emerging in relation to COVID-19 and working with adult partners to

design strategic communications activities to address them.

Globally, the Scouts' Messengers of Peace¹⁴⁰ initiative has contributed 2 billion hours of community service through 16 million local actions towards peace and sustainable development. Through these efforts, children and youth are being parts of the solutions, as *"Scouting is recognized globally as a vital force for humanitarian action and emergency response. During COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of Scouts around the world stepped up in different ways to ensure the safety of their communities and respond to their needs"*.¹⁴¹



III.

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Conclusions and moving forward: Children as part of the solution in accelerating SDG implementation while building back better

“I would say that we deserve to have our voices heard more often because it isn’t just adults who have great and extravagant ideas all the time.”

Girl, 10, Northern Ireland

III.1. Conclusions

Collected case studies show that children are actively participating and collaborating with adults in addressing violence and accelerating SDG implementation. But experience has also shown the large diversity of types of children’s engagements, proving that **it’s common for children and adults to understand ‘participation’ differently and therefore have different approaches to it. Understandings of the term vary according to the role children themselves play:** Where children are valued by adults as partners, children suggest solutions and collaborate with the adult world in regard to protection and wellbeing, accelerating SDG implementation, and other issues relevant for them.

Children’s civic engagement and meaningful participation can have a positive effect in helping prevent and respond to violence

against children. Organizations have pointed out that children who are engaged in participation processes increase their self-confidence, empowerment, and understanding of what violence is, and are in a better position to speak up or encourage their peers to do so. They also help educate their peers victims of violence, by pointing out that what they’re experiencing can be reported and properly addressed.

The peer-to-peer component is proving to be effective in scaling-up interventions, reaching the hardest to reach, contributing to raise awareness that violence is not normal or acceptable, and addressing issues related to protection, education, mental health and others.

“A lot of children and my friends have been mentally, psychologically, emotionally and socially distressed. I have really tried my best to help in the little way I can.”

Girl, 10, Nigeria¹⁴²

Participation happens in the context of other complementary rights, which need to be acknowledged. **The right to participation needs to be in harmony with all other rights, including the right to protection.** Evidence

showed that organizations, young people, and children themselves need clear guidance on how to proceed when rights appear as contradictory, or when conditions are not in place to guarantee children's right to express themselves and be protected when doing so.

Despite a decreasing level of children depending on adults for opportunities to participate, **adults continue to play an important role, and can have a positive influence on children.** Successful and meaningful child participation experiences rely on adults providing guidance to children, from capacity-building, knowledge, enabling spaces with decision makers, amplifying their voices among adults, and working as partners on specific projects.

The Internet influences the reality of billions of people every day, with an increasing penetration among children. **The digital realm has become an integral part of meaningful participation, and in turn helps prevent, respond and report VAC.** Where access is available, there are many benefits to children exercising their right to participate online. Some examples include **children accessing knowledge and capacity-building around issues such as child online protection; children participating in high level global events given the online nature of gatherings; and children increasingly accessing mental health support.**

Through the Internet, children are increasingly **accessing systems to report violence.** National helplines have seen a growth in violence reporting since adding digital channels for children to connect with them via text. Other benefits to online reporting have been highlighted, such as

children feeling comfortable communicating via text, and being able to interrupt and pick up a conversation when available.

The digital divide is affecting children's right to participate as offline participation models have had to be adapted to the online, and younger children and those without access are being excluded and left behind. Yet, **the challenge of adapting many participation methodologies to online means has also resulted in a very rich knowledge transfer between different cultures and realities.**

Children already had access to the globality of the Internet prior the pandemic, but with COVID-19, they have been encouraged to address advocacy and change through means they might have not been using before. Online participation has allowed for global collaboration, given the similar realities children everywhere had to experience.

COVID-19 has also meant a setback in development and in the economy, having had an impact on children's participation, and protection. Some children have had to stop participating due to the economic impacts of the pandemic, even in some extreme cases have had to prioritize supporting their families. But when basic needs are being met, children are being part of the solution, connecting peers with essential services, suggesting ways forward, collaborating with governments and supporting each other. **COVID-19 poses an opportunity for children to help shape programmes and interventions regarding their safety and wellbeing and move towards a world free from all forms of violence.**

III.2.

Recommendations: How to move towards a culture of meaningful participation and civic engagement

“I would tell politicians when they are making laws to do that with the heart of mothers and not of politicians.”

Girl, 12, Bolivia¹⁴³

In order to promote a culture of constructive civic engagement - and work with children towards accelerating the SDGs, building back better and addressing all forms of violence against children - the following are some evidence-based recommendations that should be taken into consideration by governments, civil society organizations, children and young people, UN agencies, the private sector, and other stakeholder working to promote children’s rights:

- i. **Identify successful child led actions, support them and help scale them up:** worldwide, children and young people are already taking action to address violence against children. Children need adults to guide them and provide training (on advocacy, communications, research, digital skills and safety, data analysis), capacity-building, and technical knowledge to understand the root causes of violence. Member States are encouraged to identify and partner with these existing initiatives and help scale them up.
- ii. **Invest in children’s networks and aim for models that have peer-to-peer engagements as a founding principle:** Adults are encouraged to work with children in identifying strategies for reaching the most vulnerable, in building strong peer networks, in providing

peer-to-peer support and promote referral systems to both prevent and respond to violence against children, and to generally aim for models that encourage peer connections, both online and offline.

- iii. **Listen to children and include them in the processes of developing protection systems.** They can provide valuable inputs regarding their needs and possible responses. Meaningful participation contributes to children’s development, confidence and self-esteem. Engaged children will turn into engaged youth, who will keep contributing towards the acceleration of the SDGs related to VAC and its drivers.



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iv. Guarantee children’s protection when exercising their right to participate including during peaceful social protests
When children exercise their rights to expression and peaceful assembly, adults have critical roles to play: guaranteeing children’s right to participate, and ensuring they’re protected while doing so, both offline and online, including when they’re exercising their rights peacefully on the streets and in public gatherings. A right’s-based approach should prioritize children’s best interest, avoiding arrest and any form of violence.

v. Expand and invest in affordability of digital access for all children, especially those most at risk of being left behind.
Children can fulfill many of their rights online, including their rights to protection, expression, and access to information. Online access also enables States to have more periodic engagement with children,

and for children to be part of national, regional, and global discussions. Digital means should also be incorporated in violence prevention and response systems, including children’s helplines.

vi. Partner with children and young people:
Governments are encouraged to reach out and partner with children, with special attention to those who are already actively engaged in civic processes, and work on solutions and recommendations. Children who are already engaged in participation activities have acquired technical knowledge and experience and have much to offer in accelerating SDG implementation and building back better. Partnering with child- and youth-led organizations is a recommended entry point towards activating institutional participation spaces for children to be part of decision-making processes.

NOTES

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- 21 Witech, information collected via interview.
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- 27 World Vision, information collected via interview.
- 28 CRC Asia, information received via submission
- 29 Child Rights Connect, information collected via interview.
- 30 Tremendas, information collected via interview.
- 31 Save the Children, Participation Tracker, <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?usp=sharing&mid=1GILz7jTTgzUsi9JF8XJvsL1JUXMEkO7j>
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- 33 Cities Rise Up, information received via submission.
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VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children is an independent global advocate in favour of the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children, mobilizing action and political support to achieve progress the world over. The mandate of the SRSG is anchored in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights instruments and framed by the UN Study on Violence against Children.

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