

## Report of the Geneva Policy Workshop on Children and Armed Conflict 2024

August 28, 2024

### I. Introduction

1. On 28 August 2024, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict ('Watchlist') and the Geneva Human Rights Platform of the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights convened a policy workshop on children and armed conflict. The *Geneva Policy Workshop on Children and Armed Conflict* focused on strengthening coordination between Geneva- and New York-based mechanisms for the protection of children affected by armed conflict. The workshop brought together representatives from Member States, UN offices and agencies, international investigative mechanisms, UN treaty bodies, civil society organizations, and academia to identify priorities and develop actionable recommendations to address the challenges of protecting children in conflict. This is the eleventh such policy workshop organized by Watchlist, alongside an academic partner, and the first of Watchlist's workshops to be held in Geneva.

2. The Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) opened the workshop with a keynote address highlighting opportunities to strengthen coordination between Geneva-based bodies and New York-based bodies to better protect children living in war.

3. In addition to the keynote address, the workshop consisted of three main sessions and a fireside chat. The first session explored current challenges and priorities for the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda, emphasizing the need for stronger coordination between Geneva- and New York-based actors, with insights from representatives of Belgium, Uruguay, and Switzerland, as well as the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. The second session focused on the role of mechanisms such as special mandates, treaty bodies, and investigative mechanisms to strengthen the protection of children in armed conflict. The third session examined progress and persistent barriers to accountability for grave violations against children in conflict, highlighting recent innovations, challenges, and future areas for action. Finally, the fireside chat centered on key global initiatives to enhance the protection of children in war, such as the Paris Principles and Commitments, the Safe Schools Declaration, the Vancouver Principles, and the EWIPA Declaration.

4. This report summarizes the discussions and action-oriented recommendations from each session for the Security Council, UN bodies, civil society, and other stakeholders. These recommendations aim to strengthen mechanisms for protecting children, enhance accountability, and promote international commitments to prevent violations against children in armed conflict in 2024 and beyond.

### II. Opening Remarks and Keynote Address

5. The workshop opened with remarks from the organizers, followed by a keynote address by the Chair of the UN's CRC. Speakers emphasized the need for stronger mandates and enhanced collaboration between Geneva and New York actors. They highlighted the importance of aligning Security Council

actions with the work being done in Geneva, particularly regarding the CRC monitoring of state compliance with international humanitarian law and the Optional Protocol.

### **III. Panel 1: Challenges and Priorities for the UN's CAAC Agenda**

7. The first panel discussed challenges and opportunities to strengthen the protection of children in armed conflict. Panelists from Belgium, Uruguay, Switzerland, and the Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict shared insights on the need for improved communication channels and more frequent and systematic coordination.

8. Panelists highlighted examples where delays in communication between Geneva and New York hindered the timely implementation of child protection measures. They emphasized that political dynamics within Member States often delay decisions and actions at the Security Council, which further complicates efforts. Speakers also shared examples of actions taken by their missions or offices to strengthen coordination and communication. Additionally, they highlighted the essential role of Geneva- and New York-based actors in the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) and the complementary mandates of key UN entities. Panelists emphasized that creation of liaison offices and enhanced collaboration with human rights mechanisms, such as the CRC and the Universal Periodic Review, are critical to overcome coordination challenges and ensure child protection remains a cross-cutting priority.

9. Panelists proposed specific actions, including expanding the Group of Friends on CAAC to ensure comprehensive representation and enhancing real-time communication through regular virtual conferences between Geneva- and New York-based Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMRs). They stressed the importance of leveraging these tools to keep child protection issues at the forefront of discussions in both Geneva and New York.

### **IV. Panel 2: Mechanisms to Increase the Protection of Children Affected by Armed Conflict**

10. The second panel focused on the role of mechanisms such as special mandates, treaty bodies, and investigative mechanisms to strengthen the protection of children in armed conflict, and how to bridge mechanisms at work in Geneva with those based in New York. Panelists discussed the role of the CRC, particularly its efforts to review compliance with child protection laws during state party reviews. They highlighted how these mechanisms are crucial for documenting violations and holding perpetrators accountable.

11. Panelists discussed how the MRM has effectively documented grave violations and guided policy responses in conflict zones like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, they acknowledged that the MRM's capacity is often limited by resource constraints and political support, which restricts its ability to cover all conflict zones comprehensively. They emphasized the need to strengthen resources for the MRM to improve child protection in armed conflict.

12. The panel also highlighted the role of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in addressing specific challenges faced by children with disabilities in armed conflicts. Panelists

emphasized the CRPD's involvement in state reporting processes, which ensures that the rights of children with disabilities receive systematic attention. Panelists also encouraged child protection actors and civil society organizations to reach out proactively on key issues and trends relevant to diverse treaty bodies – not only those focused on children specifically – to ensure children's rights are treated as a cross-cutting issue.

13. The discussion extended to the importance of data for capturing children's perspectives and setting strategic priorities. Panelists called for robust documentation mechanisms to better understand the challenges faced by children, particularly those with disabilities. They emphasized the need for alliances and working groups to promote the CAAC agenda and ensure coordination and complementarity among organizations working on child protection.

#### **V. Panel 3: Strengthening Accountability for Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict**

15. The third panel focused on progress, lessons learned, and continuing barriers toward holding perpetrators accountable for grave violations against children in armed conflict at the international and domestic levels. Panelists emphasized the importance of integrating systematic and sustained child rights expertise within accountability mechanisms and called for ongoing collaboration among international actors to ensure justice. Panelists also identified engaging armed parties and using both formal justice systems, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), along with national mechanisms, as crucial steps to address these violations. They stressed the need for continuous political and financial support to pursue justice for children.

16. The panel examined recent resources, such as the [Guidance Note of the Secretary General on Child Rights Mainstreaming](#), the ICC [Revised Policy on Children](#), which aim to strengthen a rights-based approach. Panelists highlighted the deployment of child rights experts in conflict zones as a significant advancement, allowing for more specialized investigations and a stronger focus on the needs and rights of children. Speakers also raised concrete examples and lessons-learned from investigative mechanisms which have successfully integrated child rights expertise, resulting in more child-centered approaches to justice, highlighting the experience of Justice Rapid Response and the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel.

17. Despite these advancements, panelists identified significant challenges in ensuring effective accountability. They discussed the complex political, financial, and logistical obstacles that hinder the documentation and investigation of violations. In many conflict zones, severe access limitations and resource constraints prevent investigative bodies from operating at full capacity. Panelists strongly emphasized the need for greater political will and financial resources to close the accountability gap, highlighting the need for systematic support to embed children's rights in both international and national accountability mechanisms. They also acknowledged the role of traditional/informal justice mechanisms as essential in providing children with access to justice, particularly in regions where formal judicial systems may be less accessible.

18. Throughout the session, panelists emphasized the importance of integrating a child rights lens into all aspects of accountability. They discussed how recent initiatives, such as deploying child rights experts and introducing stronger language in UN resolutions, have begun shaping the global response to violations against children. However, panelists noted that much more work needs to be done to ensure that children are seen as victims of war and that their access to justice is prioritized.

#### **VI. Fireside Chat: Global Tools and Initiatives to Protect Children in Armed Conflict**

21. The fireside chat discussed key global initiatives to enhance the protection of children in war, such as the Paris Principles and Commitments, the Safe Schools Declaration, the Vancouver Principles, and the EWIPA Declaration.

22. Panelists emphasized challenges and successes in implementing the Paris Principles, including the need for criminalizing child recruitment, establishing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) within armed forces. They noted difficulties in integrating the principles into counterterrorism and conflict settings with high insurgent activity. Panelists also highlighted the importance of handover protocols for children encountered in military operations, stressing that these protocols are key tools to prevent the detention of children, acknowledging that children associated with armed forces or armed groups are primarily to be treated as victims, and that their reintegration should be prioritized.

23. Panelists discussed the Safe Schools Declaration's impact in driving military and legal reforms to protect education during conflict, raising examples from the African Union and the Central African Republic's Child Protection Code. Panelists highlighted challenges, such as the rising attacks on schools and hospitals and the lack of accountability for these violations. They identified contributing factors, including ongoing conflicts, climate change effects, and declining democratic governance in some regions. Panelists discussed the lack of accountability and called for stronger preventive and legal measures.

24. Panelists highlighted the important role of the Vancouver Principles in preventing child recruitment and protecting children in armed conflict. They emphasized the need for training military and police forces, particularly in peacekeeping contexts, to identify and prevent the recruitment and use of children. Panelists spoke to the critical role civil society organizations can play in this regard and the importance of collaboration between military forces and civil society organizations to fully integrate child protection into military operations.

25. The discussion also addressed the impact of explosive weapons in populated areas, emphasizing the disproportionate harm to children. Panelists discussed the EWIPA Declaration noting children's severe injuries and limited access to specialized care. Panelists urged states to recognize children's specific needs in these contexts and called for further investigations into the long-term impacts of explosive weapons on children's physical and psychological health.

## **VII. Recommendations**

26. Throughout the workshop discussions, the following recommendations were proposed to strengthen coordination between Geneva- and New York-based mechanisms for the protection of children affected by armed conflict. Additionally, participants welcomed the holding of this first CAAC policy dialogue in Geneva and encouraged to continue this practice, to complement the ongoing policy dialogues in New York.

### Strengthen Coordination and Communication

- a. UN Member States, UN treaty bodies, UN offices and agencies, and civil society should strengthen and ensure systematic communication between Geneva- and New York-based colleagues to ensure that developments on CAAC are communicated in a timely manner to all relevant stakeholders. Dialogue and collaboration should be sustained among UN bodies, Member States, and civil society to advance the CAAC agenda in multilateral forums.
- b. Relevant UN offices, agencies, and civil society organizations could explore developing a newsletter or information-sharing platform to facilitate communication between Geneva- and New York-based actors.
- c. The Groups of Friends of CAAC in New York and in Geneva should cultivate and maintain geographic diversity in Member States engaging on CAAC through targeted outreach and inclusion efforts.
- d. UN Members States and international donors should enhance support for capacity-building initiatives, focusing on funding and expertise-sharing among stakeholders documenting and addressing crimes against children.

### Promote Accountability and Legal Frameworks

- a. Independent investigative mechanisms and commissions of inquiry should share evidence of crimes involving and affecting children with relevant justice bodies, as appropriate, such as the ICC and ICJ, to ensure justice for violations against children.
- b. Relevant UN offices and agencies, and civil society organizations should develop guidance frameworks on child rights approaches to accountability and disseminate existing resources to support their integration into ongoing efforts.
- c. Investigative and accountability mechanisms should incorporate intersectional approaches to address the diverse impacts of violations on children, considering factors like age, gender, disability, and ethnicity. Such mechanisms should also examine the use of explosive weapons on children, with a focus on legal and child rights perspectives.

### Enhance the Implementation of Global Tools

- a. States endorsing the Paris Principles, Safe Schools Declaration, Vancouver Principles, and the EWIPA Declaration should organize workshops to promote coordinated implementation, and exchange lessons learned and good practices. Regional and sub-regional organizations can play

an important convening role in this regard, as well as support further endorsement of these instruments.

- b. Endorsing Member States should utilize existing resources and implementation guidance to translate commitments into concrete action; drawing on support networks, including relevant UN offices and agencies, the ICRC, and civil society organizations.
- c. UN Member States should promote the use of child rights-focused guidelines in military and legal reforms to ensure compliance with international commitments.
- d. Donors should provide resources for additional research on the impacts of explosive weapons on children, capturing both direct and reverberating impacts, including long-term mental health impacts, to strengthen effectiveness of response and harm mitigation efforts.