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Report on the Geneva Policy Workshop on Children and Armed Conflict 2025

August 26, 2025

Executive Summary

On 26 August 2025, a wide range of stakeholders, including UN agencies, Member States, civil society organizations, and academic institutions, gathered in Geneva to reflect on the current state of the children and armed conflict (CAAC) agenda, identify pressing challenges, and discuss ways to mobilize collective efforts to better protect children. Organized by Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights with the support of the Governments of Belgium and Switzerland, the workshop provided a timely and action-oriented forum for exchange across the Geneva-New York CAAC divide.

The workshop took place in a difficult global context: 2025 saw the highest number of verified grave violations against children since the creation of the CAAC mandate¹. At the same time, the international community is witnessing UN reforms, sharp budgetary reductions, UN mission drawdowns, and a global multilateral crisis. Panelists repeatedly underlined the consequences of these developments, including a weakening of monitoring and reporting capacities, increasing impunity, and declining support for accountability mechanisms.

Over the course of four thematic sessions, panelists identified priority areas for immediate action and long-term structural improvements. They also emphasized the importance of leveraging Geneva-based mechanisms such as the Human Rights Council, treaty bodies, and Universal Periodic Review (UPR), as well as fostering stronger synergies with New York-based actors.

I. Opening Remarks

The workshop opened with statements from the organizers, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, and the Geneva Academy as well as from a representative of the Belgium government. They all reiterated the urgency of addressing the worsening situation of children in armed conflict. It was noted on multiple occasions that the 2025 Secretary-General's Annual Report on CAAC reflected a record

¹ Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict. A/79/878 S/2025/247. 17 June 2025

number of grave violations, driven by an increase in armed conflicts and a growing disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law.

Speakers highlighted the severe budgetary constraints affecting UN agencies and child protection actors, emphasizing the risk that these financial pressures would undermine both prevention and response to the violations of children's rights in armed conflict. The dramatic reduction in resources was seen not only as a logistical challenge but also as a signal of waning political will. At the same time, participants underscored the importance of creative and coordinated responses. Opportunities for action were outlined, including strengthening legal and policy frameworks, investing in the UN Security Council's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), and reinforcing endorsement and implementation of international commitments such as the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD).

The need to bridge the Geneva-New York divide was a recurring theme, with calls to improve communication and cooperation between policy, legal, and field-based actors.

II. Roundtable Exploring the Current State of CAAC: Challenges and Opportunities

This first panel focused on how actors, particularly those based in Geneva and New York, can better coordinate efforts to advance the CAAC agenda in today's complex geopolitical landscape. Panelists reflected on the erosion of international legal norms, the lack of accountability, and a growing normalization of protracted conflicts.

1. Panelists highlighted the urgency of restoring political momentum around the protection of children in armed conflict, warning that international polarization and geopolitical paralysis are weakening institutional responses. The recent delays in the appointment of the new Chair of the Security Council Working Group on CAAC and the difficulties in consensus-building were cited as symptoms of broader dysfunction.

2. Panelists identified significant operational challenges to the effective implementation of the MRM, including increasing denial of humanitarian access, the growth of urban warfare, and the use of digital tools by armed actors to recruit children. Budget cuts and mission drawdowns were seen as exacerbating these problems, with field-level child protection mechanisms left without adequate logistical or staffing support.

3. The critical role of Geneva-based mechanisms was emphasized, including the Human Rights Council, and its investigative and accountability mechanisms treaty bodies, its Universal Periodic Review mechanism, and Special Procedures, as well as the human rights treaty bodies. These mechanisms were described as underused tools that can amplify the CAAC agenda, provided there is sufficient political support and technical coordination.

4. Recommendations included strengthening cross-pillar collaboration, particularly between the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, UNICEF, OHCHR,

and civil society. Panelists called for national frameworks to be strengthened, for more Member States to ratify and implement the Rome Statute, and for the MRM to be treated as an essential mechanism requiring sustained investment.

III. Panel: Beyond Compliance: Exploring a Harm and Need Approach to the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict

The second panel examined the limitations of applying a purely legal compliance lens to protecting children in conflict and explored the potential of a “harm and need” approach to better capture the lived reality of conflict for children, influence the behavior of armed actors and design more holistic interventions².

1. Panelists underscored that legal compliance is an essential tool for reducing suffering but not sufficient on its own. A growing number of parties to conflict, including both governments and non-state armed groups, either openly disregard international law or comply in ways that still result in significant harm to children. In many cases, profound harm to children occurs when behavior is unregulated by the law or in legal grey zone, particularly with respect to mental health and long-term psychosocial well-being.

2. A shift in approach was proposed, moving from legal compliance to value-based restraint. Panelists emphasized the importance of influencing the internal values and incentives of armed actors, rather than relying solely on legal norms. In this context, the harm and needs approach was presented as a promising strategy to connect with armed actors and promote children’s rights and protection through more persuasive, context-sensitive means.

3. The panel explored the impact of armed conflict on children’s mental health, including trauma from witnessing violence, prolonged stress due to, inter alia, displacement, and cumulative emotional harm. Experts called for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to be integrated with child protection and education programming, rather than treated as an auxiliary service.

4. The importance of child participation was reaffirmed. Panelists stressed that children have the right to be heard, also in conflict settings. Creative mechanisms must be developed and sustained to ensure children’s safe, meaningful, and ethical participation in peacebuilding and humanitarian responses.

IV. Panel: Protecting Children’s Right to Education in Armed Conflict – Tools for Concrete Action

This panel focused on attacks on education and military use of schools, while highlighting positive developments, including the growing number of states endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration. It also

² Beyond Compliance Consortium: [Beyond Compliance Consortium – Building evidence on promoting restraint by armed actors](#)

considered practical ways to advance the protection of education through international mechanisms and national action plans.

1. Panelists welcomed the ten-year anniversary of the SSD, which now counts 121 endorsements across all regions. However, they warned that implementation remains inconsistent, and several regions continue to experience widespread military use of educational facilities, often by state actors.

2. Military use of schools was identified as a key risk factor for sexual violence, recruitment and use of children, and long-term disruption to learning with enduring impacts on the achievement of sustained peace and sustainable development. Panelists called for stronger accountability mechanisms, including criminalization of the military use of schools under domestic law.

3. Geneva-based actors were encouraged to strengthen the Geneva SSD Group of Friends and promote the creation of a similar group in New York. Panelists noted that many states still question the added value of the SSD, suggesting that advocacy should return to its core rationale: “protecting education is not a peacetime luxury but a legal and moral imperative, even during conflict.”

4. Panelists reiterated the complementarity of protection of the right to education under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The report by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education,³ which includes eight concrete policy recommendations, was presented as a key advocacy tool. These recommendations span the criminalization of education-related crimes, data collection, engagement with non-state actors, and emergency preparedness.

V. Panel: Strengthening Accountability for Grave Violations against Children in Armed Conflict

The final session addressed the accountability gap that continues to undermine child protection, with a focus on legal developments, investigative mechanisms, and the integration of children’s rights into broader justice efforts.

1. Panelists stressed the urgent need to close the gap between legal obligations and implementation. Despite the existence of comprehensive international frameworks, grave violations against children persist at alarming levels, often with little or no accountability. This gap was attributed to limited political will, weak domestic legislation, and under-resourced investigative bodies.

2. The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights report on the rights of the child and violations of the human rights of children in armed conflict (A/HRC/60/51) and the Crimes Against Humanity Treaty negotiations were presented as two major opportunities to advance accountability. The High Commissioner’s report reinforces that states, by ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are bound to uphold all children’s rights, at all times, including in situations of armed conflict. It clarifies that

³ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, “Right to education in armed conflict: a human rights imperative” 15 October 2025, A/80/479 <https://docs.un.org/A/80/479>

the rights of the child in situations of armed conflict are comprehensively protected under international human rights, humanitarian and criminal law. These frameworks remain relevant and adequate, and, together with global and regional standards and commitments, provide a robust and coherent legal basis for preventing violations, ensuring protection and securing remedies for conflict-affected children. Concerns were raised about the lack of references to children in the current draft of the CAH⁴. Expanding the list of crimes to reflect children's experiences, incorporating child-specific provisions, explicitly including children as victims and witnesses, and child-centered approaches into a future Crimes Against Humanity Treaty would help domestic justice systems to better capture children's unique experiences and needs, and to uphold their rights. This will enhance the protection of children and ensure accountability and redress for crimes against humanity.

3. Panelists highlighted the role of Geneva-based investigative mechanisms, such as the commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions of the Human Rights Council supported by OHCHR's Human Rights Inquiries Branch (HRIB) and its Independent Investigative Support Section. These bodies are increasingly integrating child protection and child rights expertise but continue to face security, access, and funding challenges. Standardized data protocols and closer collaboration with the MRM were proposed as concrete steps to strengthen accountability.

4. The importance of remedies and reparation, including administrative reparations and education as a form of reparation, was emphasized as a tangible form of justice for children. Participants also called for the meaningful participation of child victims in justice processes and urged Member States to support flexible funding for human rights investigations.

VII. Key Takeaways and Recommendations

1. Urgency and Action

The worsening situation for children in armed conflict requires not only stronger commitments but urgent action. Political will must be matched by investment and accountability.

2. Integration and Coordination

Bridging the Geneva-New York divide is essential. Cross-pillar collaboration must be strengthened to ensure that legal, humanitarian, and political tools are working in concert.

3. Protection and Participation

Children are not only victims but rights-holders. Protection mechanisms must include opportunities for their participation in decisions affecting them, including in peace processes.

⁴ Children and Crimes Against Humanity Coalition, [Justice for Children in the Future Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes Against Humanity](#), 2025

4. Accountability and Implementation

Legal frameworks must be backed by implementation, enforcement, and reparation. States should ensure domestic legislation is aligned with international obligations and support child-centered investigations.

5. Sustain the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism

The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism is under threat due to funding cuts. It must be protected and preserved as a core part of ensuring accountability for children, including through full implementation of the SRSG-CAAC Mandate.