

Report of the Annual Policy Workshop on Children and Armed Conflict

27 January 2025

I. Introduction

1. The non-governmental organization (NGO) Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (“Watchlist”) and Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) convened a policy workshop on 27 January 2025. The workshop brought together representatives of United Nations Member States, including members of the Security Council, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG-CAAC), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), civil society organizations, and academia, to discuss priorities for the United Nations children and armed conflict (CAAC) agenda in 2025. This is the twelfth such policy workshop organized by Watchlist since 2013, and the second co-organized with Columbia University. The workshop sought to engage participants in identifying priorities and developing recommendations for concrete, targeted actions to be taken in the coming year within the framework of the CAAC agenda.
2. The Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict opened the workshop with a keynote address, delivered by video message, reflecting on recent trends and developments in the CAAC agenda from 2024 and upcoming priorities for 2025. The Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations delivered introductory remarks, highlighting the increasing number of grave violations committed against children globally and emphasizing that protecting children in armed conflict is a shared responsibility that extends beyond the Security Council. The workshop concluded with a closing keynote address by UNICEF which underscored the urgency of sustained political commitment, diplomacy, and cross-sectoral engagement to protect children affected by armed conflict and ensure effective implementation of the CAAC agenda.
3. In addition to the opening and closing keynote addresses and introductory remarks, the workshop consisted of four closed working sessions. The first session focused on supporting implementation of the CAAC agenda through the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (SCWG-CAAC) and the Group of Friends (GoF) of CAAC, featuring reflections by the Permanent Representative of Malta and the Deputy Permanent Representatives of Canada and Greece to the United Nations. The second session examined how available tools and international frameworks can be leveraged to address CAAC challenges in escalating conflicts, the impact of conflict dynamics on child protection mechanisms, and opportunities to strengthen responses through political, legal, and normative frameworks. The third session focused on the implementation of UN Security Council recommendations on CAAC, highlighting good practices, challenges, and gaps in the dissemination and follow-up of Working Group conclusions and Security Council resolutions at the national and international levels. The final session discussed the role of child protection staff in UN peacekeeping and special political missions, the challenges of preserving child protection capacities during mission transitions or drawdowns, and strategies to ensure continued expertise and support in these contexts.

4. This report summarizes the discussions in these sessions and provides recommendations for action by the Security Council, the United Nations, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to end and prevent violations against children in situations of armed conflict in 2025 and going forward.

II. Opening Keynote Address

5. The Permanent Mission of Belgium delivered introductory remarks during the opening segment and emphasized the urgency of strengthening the CAAC agenda in light of the record number of grave violations verified by the United Nations in 2024. Belgium reaffirmed its view that protecting children in armed conflict is a shared responsibility that extends beyond the Security Council. The statement highlighted Belgium's longstanding support for the CAAC mandate, including its prior leadership as Chair of the SCWG-CAAC and its implementation of good practices such as shortening the reporting cycle on country situations to two years. Belgium highlighted that the increased output of the OSRSG-CAAC and monitoring and reporting teams enabled the timely adoption of 13 conclusions. Belgium also noted its unique role as one of the only donors providing direct financial support to the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM). Belgium emphasized its efforts to mainstream the CAAC agenda beyond the UN system, including through the adoption of the EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict during its presidency of the European Council. The statement underscored Belgium's engagement in local Groups of Friends on CAAC in Geneva, Brussels, Vienna, and Amman.
6. The Special Representative opened the workshop with a video message, highlighting trends, challenges, and progress made for the protection of children in armed conflict in 2024. Against the backdrop of continuing violations of international humanitarian and international human rights law, efforts must be redoubled to immediately halt these violations and uphold international legal frameworks that protect children. Despite the reality of ongoing conflicts, the CAAC mandate has led to tangible results for children, including the release of more than 200,000 children from armed forces and groups, the signing of over 40 action plans with the UN, and the ratification of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) by 173 State Parties. These achievements demonstrate sustained efforts to engage with parties to conflict and strengthen legal protections for children worldwide.
7. Looking ahead, 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1612, which established the SGWG-CAAC and the MRM. This milestone presents a unique opportunity to reinforce and leverage these mechanisms to enhance child protection efforts. Furthermore, the newly adopted Security Council Resolution 2764, the 14th resolution focused on children and armed conflict, reaffirms the importance of sustainable child protection capacities in conflict and post-conflict settings. At a time when UN peacekeeping transitions are increasing, maintaining political, technical, and financial support for child protection advisors and monitoring mechanisms is essential to safeguarding children's rights and ensuring the effectiveness of the CAAC mandate.

III. Challenges and Priorities for the CAAC Agenda in 2025

8. During the first working session of the workshop, the Permanent Representative of Malta, the Deputy Representative of Canada and Greece to the United Nations provided reflections in their respective roles as the former chair of the SCWG-CAAC, the current chair of the GoF of CAAC, and the presumed forthcoming chair of the SCWG-CAAC on challenges to the effective implementation of the CAAC

agenda over the past year and lessons learned for the future, as well as how to leverage existing tools and mechanisms for addressing CAAC concerns.

9. Panelists reflected on progress achieved in 2024 and challenges facing the CAAC agenda in 2025. They emphasized that consensus-building was central to the Working Group's success over the past two years, allowing for the adoption of 11 conclusions, the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2764 (2024), and the resumption of field visits, which had been halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Panelists highlighted the importance of engaging with civil society to shape statements and policies, as well as to ensure accountability. They also stressed the need to mainstream the CAAC agenda, integrating child protection language in peacekeeping mandates and other relevant UN Security Council discussions and outcomes. Panelists underscored the value of field visits, noting that direct engagement on the ground provided a realistic perspective on challenges and informed the Council's work. Additionally, they recognized efforts to expand CAAC initiatives, such as the CAAC Virtual Summer School and CAAC primer course, as positive steps in strengthening awareness and technical capacity on child protection issues.
10. In addition to these achievements, panelists highlighted multiple ongoing challenges. They raised concerns about the increasing politicization of the CAAC agenda, particularly regarding listing processes, which they warned could undermine the core objective of protecting children in armed conflict. Panelists noted that political considerations had, in some cases, delayed decisions and detracted from evidence-based approaches in the SCWG-CAAC. They also pointed to delays in adopting Working Group conclusions, explaining that some reports remained unresolved for several years, making them outdated and less relevant to evolving conflict dynamics. The inability to finalize conclusions on Syria exemplified this challenge. Panelists stressed the need to fully utilize existing tools and mechanisms to advance the CAAC agenda. They called for stronger reliance on verified, evidence-based information to inform Security Council decision-making, emphasizing that data must take precedence over political considerations. They encouraged greater collaboration between the SCWG-CAAC and the GoF of CAAC, noting that while the SCWG-CAAC meets in closed consultations, regional GoF serve as valuable partners in advocacy and implementation efforts. Panelists also reiterated the importance of systematically integrating CAAC issues into Security Council resolutions, particularly during peacekeeping transitions, to ensure that child protection remains a core priority.
11. In the ensuing discussions for this session, participants addressed (a) the need for the SCWG-CAAC to fully utilize its available tools, including briefings, private meetings, and field visits, to strengthen monitoring and engagement on grave violations, recognizing that field visits not only inform conclusions but also improve understanding of broader documentation challenges; (b) the importance of ensuring Security Council decisions are informed by verified, evidence-based information, with regular engagement between the Working Group and country experts to provide timely updates on evolving conflict dynamics; (c) the need for systematic outreach and advocacy to familiarize key stakeholders with CAAC processes and ensure child protection considerations remain central in bilateral and multilateral negotiations; (d) the challenges posed by delayed timelines for reports, particularly in rapidly evolving crises such as Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan, reinforcing the need for more frequent briefings from UN experts and civil society to complement official reporting; and (e) the limitations of the Working Group's mandate, underscoring the importance of leveraging broader UN mechanisms, including General Assembly processes, to advance child protection efforts beyond the Security Council's scope.

IV. Leveraging Tools and Frameworks to Address CAAC Challenges in Escalating Conflict

12. The second session of the workshop focused on the international frameworks and child protection tools that can be leveraged to address CAAC concerns amid escalating conflicts. Panelists examined the impact of conflict dynamics on key mechanisms, including the MRM, action plans, child protection programming, and humanitarian access. They discussed how political fora, legal instruments, and normative frameworks, such as Security Council resolutions, can support the continued functioning of these tools. The session also explored rising grave violations and the role of civil society in strengthening evidence-sharing and advocacy.
13. Panelists emphasized the urgent need for accountability in attacks on education, healthcare, and water systems. Using Sudan as a case study, they noted that 70 percent of health facilities are non-functional and millions of children remain out of school, increasing their vulnerability to grave violations and other serious harms. They called for integrating child protection into humanitarian responses across all sectors to ensure a comprehensive approach. They also highlighted how the MRM now covers all 18 states in Sudan, enabling efforts to map conflict zones and engage parties to the conflict, and that the verified data on grave violations informs planning and provision of services to conflict-affected children. Panelists identified the GoF of Sudan as a key platform for advocacy and expressed optimism that sustained engagement could lead to an action plan to end grave violations against children.
14. Panelists also addressed the role of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in responding to violations, including the killing and deportation of children. They highlighted the CRC's role in holding States accountable through its review of periodic reports, issuance of Concluding Observations, and their follow-up procedures. Panelists stressed that the CRC could reinforce the CAAC agenda by urging governments to align domestic legislation with international standards and close accountability gaps. They called for stronger collaboration between the CRC and the OSRSG-CAAC, including through information sharing and complementary monitoring. Panelists also encouraged the use of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) as a strategic advocacy platform to elevate child protection concerns and press for reform at the national level.
15. Panelists discussed the use of existing tools and frameworks to strengthen child protection, including mechanisms from the Protection of Civilians (PoC) agenda. They highlighted the Secretary-General's annual PoC report and the Informal Expert Group on PoC as platforms for technical discussions on protection concerns and pointed to the Aide Memorie on the Protection of Civilians as a practical tool to guide the Security Council's consideration of protection issues in mission mandates, including those affecting children. Panelists noted that children face higher mortality rates from explosive weapons in conflict zones and stressed the importance of risk education and civil society engagement in providing real-time updates on deteriorating child protection situations. They underscored the importance of data-driven advocacy, urging stronger efforts to share evidence across sectors and platforms to ensure timely and effective responses.
16. In the ensuing discussion, participants called for (a) the swift adoption of an action plan in Sudan to end grave violations against children; (b) stronger collaboration between the CRC and civil society through expert briefings to enhance compliance with child protection frameworks; (c) greater use of

international frameworks such as the Paris Principles, Vancouver Principles, Safe Schools Declaration, and EWIPA Declaration to reinforce child protection; and (d) expanded data-driven advocacy and field visits to ensure the voices of affected children inform policy discussions.

V. Implementing UN Security Council Recommendations on CAAC

17. The third session examined how UN Security Council recommendations on CAAC are implemented at the national level. Panelists discussed efforts by UN Country Teams (UNCTs), national governments, civil society, and diplomats to disseminate and apply Security Council Working Group conclusions. They also explored how Security Council resolutions on CAAC inform diplomatic engagement, national policies, and legal frameworks, highlighting challenges in translating recommendations into action and strategies to improve implementation, monitoring, and follow-up.
18. Panelists highlighted concrete examples of how CAAC-related Security Council conclusions and resolutions are used to engage parties to conflict. In the Central African Republic (CAR), the Child Protection Unit of MINUSCA engaged a listed non-state armed group (NSAG), informing its leader of their designation in the CAAC report and introducing action plans and other accountability tools. The government established a National Council in 2023 to coordinate the implementation of CAAC-related Security Council resolutions and protocols, including a national prevention plan and the rollout of the Safe Schools Declaration. Additionally, the Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) used CAAC reports to engage the government through workshops in 2024, leading to the adoption of a protocol for the handover of children in September 2024. MINUSCA has also leveraged UN Security Council resolutions to promote behavioral change, leading to policy shifts among NSAGs and the release of children from armed groups. The mission used Security Council Resolution 2601 to advocate for appropriate education and vocational training for children at risk of recruitment, supporting the government's establishment of two learning centers.
19. Panelists also examined how GoFs on CAAC operate at the country level and their role in coordinating diplomatic engagement and advocacy. They highlighted the Abuja and Kinshasa GoFs as active platforms for information-sharing and collaboration between member states. In Abuja, the GoF meets quarterly at the ambassadorial level and has supported the development of a handover protocol while encouraging military and civil society engagement. In Mozambique, the GoF organized a high-level meeting with the SRSF-CAAC, field visits, and a joint statement, which received media coverage and political traction. Panelists stressed the importance of maintaining flexible and responsive GoFs, particularly in challenging contexts where diplomatic presence is limited. They also highlighted the Universal Periodic Review, the Human Rights Council, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child as tools for reinforcing CAAC commitments. Panelists cited the 2023 Oslo Conference on CAAC as an example of how global convenings can mobilize funding and political support for implementation efforts.
20. Panelists addressed how legal and policy frameworks complement one another in implementing CAAC recommendations. Panelists examined how national frameworks integrate CAAC obligations, using examples from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Philippines, and Myanmar. They emphasized the need to assess whether CAAC-related laws are effectively implemented or remain symbolic, highlighting the importance of accountability, national capacity-building, and security sector reform in ensuring meaningful enforcement.

21. Panelists emphasized the need for accountability mechanisms to address attacks on education, particularly as these attacks have increased in recent years. They referenced the 121 endorsements of the Safe Schools Declaration and the importance of Security Council Resolution 2601 in reinforcing the protection of education in conflict settings. While legal frameworks exist to prosecute attacks on education, panelists noted that few prosecutions have taken place—only two international cases and four domestic cases to date. To strengthen accountability, panelists recommended: (a) criminalizing education-related violations in domestic law, (b) developing multi-disciplinary expertise in investigation and prosecution, (c) increasing capacity to conduct child-sensitive interviews, (d) effectively cooperating with CSOs who are often the ‘first responders’ to crimes against education, and (e) pushing national cases up to the international level for prosecution. They cited the WG CAAC 2024 conclusions on CAR, where the government was asked to ensure that attacks on schools and the military use of schools are investigated and that those responsible are duly prosecuted in line with the Safe Schools Declaration and called upon the Special Criminal Court to integrate all violations and abuses against children in its prosecution strategy as an example of good practice.
22. In the ensuing discussion, participants addressed (a) the challenges of implementing CAAC recommendations in contexts where NSAGs are difficult to access or engage, emphasizing the need for localized engagement with community leaders; (b) gaps between international legal standards and national legislation, particularly regarding proportionality in sentencing and on-the-ground implementation; (c) the need for greater coordination between regional GoFs and NYC-based diplomatic efforts to clarify country-level needs; and (d) the importance of leveraging existing human rights mechanisms, such as the CRC to advance CAAC implementation at the domestic level. Panelists also underscored the role of Security Council conclusions in pressuring parties to conflict, noting that naming governments and NSAGs in reports encourages them to respond and take action.

VI. Sustaining Child Protection in Evolving UN Mandates and Mission Transitions

23. The fourth session of the workshop examined the role of dedicated child protection staff in UN peacekeeping and special political missions and how to preserve these capacities during mission transitions or drawdowns in line with Security Council Resolution 2764 (2024). Panelists discussed the functions, resources, and expertise of child protection staff, highlighting where capacities are transferable or at risk during transitions. They explored ways to ensure continuity in child protection mandates, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning, sustained funding, and coordination between UN entities, Member States, and civil society to prevent gaps in protection for children affected by armed conflict.
24. Panelists examined the critical role of peacekeeping operations in supporting child protection mandates, particularly through the MRM. Missions provide security, access, and logistical support for documenting grave violations against children and serve as multipliers by training mission personnel (including uniformed personnel) on child protection. As missions withdraw, these capabilities are often lost or severely diminished. The abrupt withdrawal of MINUSMA in Mali demonstrated the challenges of rapid mission withdrawals, with a brief handover period limiting the ability to properly transfer responsibilities to successor entities. Panelists stressed that transition planning should be phased, proactive, and integrated into mission strategies from inception, with Member States playing a key role in ensuring child protection remains a priority in Security Council decision-making. Panelists

then focused on challenges in sustaining child protection efforts following mission transitions or drawdowns, highlighting case studies from the DRC and Mali. In South Kivu, the withdrawal of MONUSCO led to verification backlogs in grave violation cases, as successor entities lacked capacity and resources. Logistical constraints prevented NGOs from accessing certain areas, and community-based protection mechanisms previously supported by the mission were left without replacement funding. Similarly, in Mali, the rapid departure of MINUSMA created a gap in child protection, particularly in negotiations for the release of children from armed groups, as no entity took over these responsibilities. In both cases, mission transitions or withdrawals resulted in heightened risks of recruitment, abuse, and inadequate reintegration services for children.

25. Panelists emphasized the unique vulnerabilities of girls associated with armed groups, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where child marriage and recruitment into armed groups are often indistinguishable. Many girls are not recognized as CAAFAG, limiting their access to reintegration programs, medical care, and psychosocial support. Panelists referenced the [Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups](#) technical note, which provides guidance on the release and reintegration of girls, including the need for safe spaces, childcare support, and tailored vocational training. They stressed that without targeted reintegration programs, girls remain invisible within the child protection system.
26. Panelists further examined Resolution 2764 (2024), adopted in December 2024, which outlines key considerations for child protection planning in UN transitions or withdrawals. Panelists noted that peacekeeping mission withdrawals often remove high-level engagement opportunities, as Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs) have greater access to in-country decision-makers than UN Resident Coordinators. The case of Sudan illustrated both challenges and successes—while five child protection posts were secured during the transition from UNAMID to UNITAMS, the overall shift from a peacekeeping mission to a political mission—and eventually to a UN Country Team—resulted in reduced resources and diminished engagement capacity. Panelists underscored the need for early engagement with Security Council members, systematic integration of child protection into mission planning cycles, and sustained advocacy with the Fifth Committee to secure funding.
27. In the ensuing discussion, participants addressed (a) the importance of strengthening coordination between UN entities and civil society during mission transitions, including the need for clear standard operating procedures (SOPs) to guide collaboration; (b) ensuring that child protection responsibilities are not prematurely handed over to national governments, particularly in contexts where governments lack capacity or political will; (c) the role of national and regional child protection actors in supporting mission transitions, with calls for stronger engagement with local NGOs to ensure continuity; and (d) the need for dedicated funding to bridge gaps between mission drawdowns and the scaling up of UN country teams. Panelists emphasized the political responsibility to sustain child protection mandates, particularly in negotiations for the release of children from armed groups. As missions withdraw, stakeholders must identify alternative actors to fill critical roles, ensuring that child protection expertise is preserved, and national actors are equipped to support ongoing efforts.

VII. Closing Keynote Address

28. The workshop concluded with a keynote address by UNICEF emphasizing the urgent need for collective action to protect children in armed conflict. Noting a 21 percent increase in verified grave

violations in 2024—the highest ever recorded—the speaker highlighted the devastating impact of violence on children in Sudan, Myanmar, Lebanon, Haiti, the DRC, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, while stressing that the true scale is likely far worse. The address called on Member States, civil society, and UN entities to sustain child protection capacities, particularly during mission transitions, and reaffirmed the importance of Resolution 2764 in maintaining child protection advisors and funding. The speaker urged stakeholders to protect CAAC efforts from political divisions, engage all parties to conflict, and ensure due diligence in all engagements—underscoring that the CAAC agenda is a shared responsibility that demands sustained advocacy and accountability.

VIII. Recommendations

29. Throughout the workshop discussions, the following recommendations were proposed to strengthen the implementation of the CAAC agenda, improve accountability for grave violations against children, and ensure sustained child protection capacities in evolving UN mandates and mission transitions.

Leveraging Tools and Frameworks to Address CAAC Challenges in Escalating Conflicts

- a) UN Member States should ensure child protection remains central in diplomatic and mediation efforts, integrating CAAC concerns into peace negotiations and Security Council deliberations, including leveraging influence on parties to conflict to adopt and implement action plans to end and prevent grave violations against children.
- b) The Security Council should strengthen engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations, including through calling for the adoption and implementation of concrete, joint action plans between the UN and parties to conflict and sustain diplomatic engagement.
- c) UN agencies and humanitarian actors should enhance collaboration to provide real-time updates on evolving child protection risks in conflict zones, ensuring evidence-based responses.
- d) All parties to conflict and those with leverage over parties to conflict should improve access for child protection actors to engage with all parties to conflict, addressing operational and political constraints that impede dialogue.
- e) The SCWG-CAAC should leverage the MRM and draw on complementary tools—such as the UPR, the CRC's concluding observations, PoC frameworks in UN missions, and the GoF of CAAC—to strengthen accountability and support follow-up on grave violations.

Implementing Security Council Recommendations on CAAC

- a) UN Member States should establish formal mechanisms to track and report on the implementation of SCWG-CAAC conclusions, including timelines, responsible entities, and progress indicators at the national level.
- b) National governments should incorporate Security Council recommendations—stemming from the 14 CAAC thematic resolutions and SCWG-CAAC conclusions—into national child protection frameworks, including through legislative reform, national action plans, and integration into military and police training.
- c) The New York-based Group of Friends of CAAC should work with UN missions and country teams to support the creation or revitalization of local Groups of Friends, facilitating regular dialogue between capital, field, and UNHQ to align protection priorities.

- d) The UN Security Council, including its SCWG-CAAC, should enhance engagement and coordination with child protection actors – both UN and civil society – at the country level to ensure Security Council resolutions on CAAC translate into tangible outcomes for children.
- e) The OSRSG-CAAC should ensure systematic inclusion of benchmarks related to the implementation of SCWG-CAAC conclusions in the SG’s country-specific reports to the SCWG-CAAC to assess implementation and improve accountability.

Sustaining Child Protection in UN Mission Transitions

- a) UN peace operations and UN Country Teams should initiate child protection transition planning early, ensuring that child protection functions are assessed and retained across all phases of mission drawdown.
- b) UN entities overseeing mission transitions or withdrawals should ensure that the CTFMR remains able to carry out its responsibilities following mission exit, including independent monitoring, reporting, and verification of grave violations against children, as well as engagement with conflict parties.
- c) UN missions and UN Country Teams should jointly develop integrated transition strategies with clear benchmarks for sustaining child protection capacities, and regularly consult with civil society, humanitarian actors, and regional organizations to prevent gaps in child protection, in line with existing UN guidance.
- d) UN Member States should leverage Security Council Resolution 2764 (2024) to advocate for sustainable child protection capacities and long-term commitments to child protection in mission transition or withdrawal settings.

Strengthening Accountability for Grave Violations and Attacks on Education

- a) UN Member States should prioritize the investigation and prosecution of attacks on education, ensuring national legal frameworks criminalize attacks on schools and other education-related violations.
- b) International, regional, and domestic justice mechanisms should expand legal frameworks to hold perpetrators accountable, integrating education-related crimes into national and international legal structures.
- c) UN agencies and investigative bodies should improve forensic and investigation capacities to collect evidence on attacks against schools, teachers, and students, ensuring effective documentation and prosecution.
- d) The Human Rights Council, the General Assembly, and the Security Council should ensure justice mechanisms include child-sensitive pathways, allowing safe participation of children in accountability processes.
- e) UN agencies and research institutions should enhance international cooperation to track and report education-related violations, strengthening global monitoring and responses.