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the right to development**

“We are not just the future”: challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor

Summary

In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, analyses the situation of child and youth human rights defenders, with a particular focus on structural and societal barriers to their activism, legal restrictions on their participation in civic space and the human rights violations that they face as a result of their peaceful activities in promoting and protecting human rights.



I. Introduction

1. Child and youth human rights defenders are mobilizing worldwide to demand change on a broad spectrum of issues concerning humanity today. Their activism and mobilization are at the forefront, and often the main driving force, of societal, economic and political change.
2. There has been a perceptible shift in civil society in recent years, with new tactics and innovative campaigning reinvigorating old social movements and kickstarting new ones, including on climate action, racial justice and gender equality.¹
3. At the forefront of this mobilization and catalytic change are human rights issues. Despite increasing polarization and division across the world, and despite the shrinking of civic space, child and youth human rights defenders continue to play an active role in protecting and promoting human rights. Even with pervasive age-based discrimination, there are many examples of child and youth human rights defenders standing up for the rights of individuals and communities.²
4. Currently, in 2023, more than half of the world's population are under the age of 30,³ making it the largest generation of young people in history. Among them, child and youth human rights defenders are deeply engaged in numerous international human rights movements. Whether leading global climate justice campaigns, calling for an end to war, combating gun violence, fighting gender-based violence, working towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development or spearheading protests, these defenders have one thing in common: they advocate fairer, more just and more democratic societies and a healthier planet, sometimes at great personal risk. Acting together or alone, they mobilize mass demonstrations to ensure that their voices are heard and strive to create a world where the human rights of all individuals are upheld. For young activists, the personal is often political, their activism very frequently stemming from personal experience of lived, first-hand injustices and violations causing outrage, discomfort or pain.⁴
5. Child and youth human rights defenders have also become progressively more visible, and their particular situation and specific needs more recognized, over recent years. In 2015, the Security Council recognized the important and positive contribution of youth in efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.⁵ The Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth has consistently drawn attention to the situation of young peacebuilders, including through reports on youth, peace and security and the global report on protecting young people in civic space.⁶ The independent progress study on youth and peace and security requested by the Security Council in its resolution 2250 (2015) highlighted that the civic space was not safe for young people's activism.⁷ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) launched the Youth Advisory Group in 2023 to empower and mobilize young people to stand up for their human rights. The Secretary-General's guidance note on child rights mainstreaming further added to this increased recognition. Lastly, the OHCHR Youth Advisory Group has not only been involved in events for Human Rights 75, but has also advised on a number of initiatives. The General Assembly, in the resolution on human rights defenders that it adopted in November 2023, referenced child and youth human rights defenders for the first time and called upon States to provide a safe, enabling and empowering environment for young people to promote human rights.⁸

¹ See CIVICUS – World Alliance for Citizen Participation, “Youth activism: pathways, challenges, learnings”, September 2023.

² See submission from Amnesty International. All submissions will be posted on the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

³ See <https://population.un.org/wpp>.

⁴ See CIVICUS, “Youth activism”.

⁵ See Security Council resolution 2250 (2015).

⁶ See Rita Izsák-Ndiaye, *If I Disappear: Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space* (Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2021).

⁷ See [A/72/761-S/2018/86](#).

⁸ General Assembly resolution 78/216, para. 15.

6. Meanwhile, child rights defenders, especially girls and gender-nonconforming children, and including child climate activists, have been facing growing repression in many countries.⁹ Child human rights defenders have made historic contributions to human rights and environmental protection, as recognized by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its general comment No. 26 (2023). The backlash against young defenders may be proof of their efficacy. They are shaking the system, and the guardians of the system are responding with threats to their physical, emotional and digital security.¹⁰ Child and youth activists have long been the driving force behind major milestones in human rights standards, including the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted 30 years ago. Young people participating on behalf of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) brought the much needed “reality check” and created the necessary pressure on government representatives to save the conference.¹¹ However, they have not always received the recognition that they deserve.

7. At the same time, young activists also feel pressured by narratives telling them that it is up to them to change the future and to be at the forefront of activism.

8. Some child and youth defenders, such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, are well known worldwide. The majority, however, work at local and grass-roots levels, without formal structures and against the backdrop of protective parents, restrictive school environments and increasingly vocal anti-rights movements. Many do not even consider themselves human rights defenders or are never recognized as such by their peers or the adults in their communities or organizations. Cultural and patriarchal structures and beliefs may hinder them from engaging as they would like. Despite these barriers, child and youth human rights defenders have been at the forefront of human rights movements and have achieved a significant impact, which should be acknowledged, celebrated and highlighted.

II. Concepts and methodology

A. Definitions

9. While there is no accepted definition of young persons, and while United Nations agencies, member States and other actors use varying age ranges to define young people, the Special Rapporteur, for the purposes of the present report, defines youth human rights defenders as those under 32 years of age and child human rights defenders as those under 18 years of age, who are acting peacefully to promote, protect and defend the human rights of others. The Special Rapporteur uses the terms “human rights defenders”, “defenders” and “activists” interchangeably to illustrate this concept.

10. Under article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are defined as every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. Pursuant to the Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth therein, irrespective of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. Under the Convention, the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.

11. In the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental

⁹ See United Nations News, “High Commissioner reports sharp decline in respect for children’s rights”, 16 January 2023.

¹⁰ See CIVICUS, “Youth activism”.

¹¹ Statement by Christian Strohal at the conference for child and youth human rights defenders hosted by the Special Rapporteur and the Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, held in Vienna on 5 June 2023.

Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders), the General Assembly declared that everyone had the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.¹²

12. Many child and youth human rights defenders do not identify as human rights defenders or activists. They may call themselves student counsellors, climate activists or peacebuilders. However, for the purposes of the present report, as long as they act peacefully for the promotion and protection of human rights, they are considered human rights defenders.

13. Under article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to express their views freely in matters affecting them, yet their potential and ability to contribute to society are obstructed in many countries. Furthermore, while child defenders may not face the severity of risk experienced by older defenders, some of the challenges faced by civil society at large are amplified for child and youth defenders.

B. Methodology

14. In preparing the present report, the Special Rapporteur carried out a series of consultations with child and youth human rights defenders, academics, civil society organizations working on the issue of children and young persons as human rights defenders, relevant United Nations entities and agencies and other relevant stakeholders. The report also reflects the views expressed by the 43 child and youth human rights defenders who participated in a conference, held in Vienna on 5 June 2023, organized by the Special Rapporteur and the Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

15. In listening to nearly 100 defenders from 37 States, observer States and regions,¹³ the Special Rapporteur's aim was to hear directly about the opportunities and challenges for child and youth defenders and about the areas in which greater international support and coordination was needed to protect and promote their activities and work.

16. The Special Rapporteur also issued a call for input to inform the present report to Governments, NGOs, child and youth human rights defenders and other relevant stakeholders, and received an unprecedented 140 replies.¹⁴ The Special Rapporteur wishes to thank all those who helped disseminate the call for input and, in particular, those who submitted responses to it, especially the many young defenders who took the time to contribute.

III. Protection of child human rights defenders

17. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that children are entitled to a heightened duty of care because of their special status as children, which requires specific measures that take into account their level of development and evolving capacities.

18. The Convention establishes that States parties have the obligation to take specific measures for the development of children taking account of their evolving capacities (art. 5), disabilities (art. 23) and best interests (art. 3), without discrimination (art. 2). Children should learn about human rights through education (arts. 28 and 29) and be able to exercise their right to express their views and to be heard (art. 12) and their rights to freedom of expression (art. 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art. 14), freedom of association and of peaceful assembly (art. 15) and access to information (art. 17). Children's ability to engage

¹² General Assembly resolution 53/144, annex, art. 1.

¹³ Afghanistan; Armenia; Bangladesh; Benin; Botswana; Brazil; Cameroon; Canada; China, including Hong Kong, China; Colombia; Côte d'Ivoire; Ecuador; Ethiopia; Georgia; Honduras; India; Indonesia; Kazakhstan; Kenya; Libya; Mongolia; Myanmar; Nigeria; Philippines; Poland; Republic of Moldova; Russian Federation; Syrian Arab Republic; Thailand; Türkiye; Uganda; Ukraine; United Republic of Tanzania; Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of); Zimbabwe; and State of Palestine.

¹⁴ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2023/call-input-report-special-rapporteur-human-rights-defenders-human-rights>.

in political and public affairs depends largely on the extent to which their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.¹⁵

19. Recognizing the valuable contributions and distinct challenges that children may face, the Committee on the Rights of the Child convened a day of general discussion in 2018 to focus on safeguarding the rights of child human rights defenders.¹⁶ Notably, the event marked the first global discussion centring on children as human rights defenders, with children playing a central role in planning, execution and follow-up, actively participating as speakers, moderators and members of the audience alongside adults.

20. During the interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur at the fifty-second session of the Human Rights Council, in March 2023, Luxembourg, on behalf of more than 60 countries, issued a joint statement on child human rights defenders.¹⁷ In this statement, the first of its kind for the Council, Luxembourg emphasized that child human rights defenders faced specific barriers, risks and reprisals owing to their status in society, and called on States to increase efforts to ensure the protection and effective empowerment of child human rights defenders.

IV. Specific situation of youth human rights defenders

21. Youth human rights defenders between the ages of 18 and 32 years do not fall under the scope of protection of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. At the same time, owing to their age, they face specific challenges and obstacles and merit being examined as a separate category of human rights defenders.

22. The right of youth defenders to defend rights is articulated in the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

23. It is important to stress that while frameworks and mechanisms that should protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of young human rights defenders already exist, in reality they often exist only in normative terms, and either are not always accessible to youth or inadequately respond to their unique needs.¹⁸

V. Obstacles and challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders

24. Child and youth human rights defenders often face similar barriers and violations, but their experiences are also quite distinct. In the present section of the report, the combined experiences of both groups of human rights defenders are explored and certain experiences particular to each group highlighted.

A. Practical and structural obstacles

25. Many of the barriers to child and youth activism stem from structural and societal barriers, beliefs and entrenched biases.

1. Lack of adequate support from traditional allies

26. A common theme in nearly all the consultations is the fact that while child and youth defenders often instigate and lead human rights movements, they do not receive adequate support from traditional human rights allies. The elitism of traditional, entrenched human

¹⁵ See Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Day of general discussion 2018: protecting and empowering children as human rights defenders”, outcome report, September 2018. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/days-general-discussion>.

¹⁶ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/events/days-general-discussion-dgd/2018/2018-day-general-discussion-protecting-and-empowering>.

¹⁷ Available at <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2023/03/16/joint-statement-on-child-human-rights-defenders-hrc52/>.

¹⁸ See Izsák-Ndiaye, *If I Disappear*.

rights organizations often excludes new activists, who find that they need to prove their legitimacy. This experience is particularly felt by child activists, who in some cases are also sidelined by youth activists.

2. Access to national and international support mechanisms and protection networks

27. Although subjected to some of the same repressive tactics as their older peers, including criminal charges, imprisonment and harassment, the impact of these violations can be compounded by their age, especially in the case of child human rights defenders. Furthermore, owing to a combination of their youth and the lesser amount of experience that some may have, they often do not have the same access to national and international protection mechanisms for human rights defenders. While international human rights instruments recognize the rights of all human rights defenders, including child and youth defenders, there is a lack of specific and tailored provisions addressing their unique challenges and vulnerabilities.

28. There is also a language barrier to access to United Nations human rights mechanisms and other international protection mechanisms, which, combined with lack of sufficient information and awareness, can make these instruments difficult for young people to use. In the case of child human rights defenders, consent is needed from parents and legal guardians to take up cases of human rights violations committed against them as human rights defenders, which can act as an additional barrier.

3. Legal support and access to justice

29. Access to legal aid and advice is crucial for the protection of human rights defenders and for an enabling environment in which they can carry out their work. However, child and youth human rights defenders do not have the same access to legal support as many of their older peers, often because they have fewer financial resources or have had fewer previous networking opportunities that would have allowed them to build up a wider range of allies. Some child and youth defenders reported not being fully aware of their legal rights or being unable to navigate legal processes effectively. Access to legal aid also depends on the available resources. Young activists are frustrated at being unable to apply for or gain access to funding from major international and private donors, because either they are operating through informal movements and coalitions or they are unable to register their organizations owing to restrictive laws in their countries.

30. Complaints by young defenders about acts or threats of violence or smear campaigns are often not taken seriously by police or other relevant authorities, which results in impunity for the perpetrators. Impunity is also a structural issue for many young defenders, including but not limited to gender-nonconforming or trans human rights defenders.

31. Child and youth defenders also face obstacles in gaining access to information about their human rights and the mechanisms available to them to seek protection from and reparation in case of violations of their rights, sometimes including a lack of specific forms of reparation, such as for online harassment and violence.¹⁹ Effective age- and gender-sensitive procedures, information, advice and legal and other assistance are inadequate at all levels, whether local, national or international.

32. National human rights institutions in many countries serve as important channels to receive complaints from child and youth human rights defenders, often with dedicated ombudsmen to oversee respect for children's rights and ensure clear and accessible mechanisms for lodging complaints. In other countries however, their procedures are only nominally available, without the provision of adequate recourse to defenders.

33. In order to bridge the impunity gap, some NGOs have also started initiatives to facilitate the reporting by young activists of human rights violations. For example, Africa Reconciled established peace clubs whereby 25 young activists conduct monitoring using smartphones.

¹⁹ See [A/HRC/50/25](#).

4. Academic sanctions

34. International human rights law provides numerous safeguards to protect child human rights defenders in academic settings. Under article 29 (1) (b) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, education must promote the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Similarly, under article 28 (2), States parties are required to take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the Convention. Moreover, under article 19 (2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, all people, including children, have the right to freedom of expression.

35. Child and youth human rights defenders have reported experiencing academic sanctions for their human rights work. These sanctions take various forms, including unjust expulsion, suspension, lowering of grades, threats from teachers or denial of certain educational opportunities. Academic sanctions not only infringe defenders' right to education, but also create a climate of fear, discouraging other young individuals from engaging in human rights work, leading to a broader chilling effect.

36. Young defenders may also face limited prospects and opportunities for academic and professional growth. Some participants in Fridays for Future were not allowed to take their final examinations. Another young activist was unable to find a supervisor for his thesis as part of his master's degree owing to his activism. Medical students in Nicaragua were expelled from their universities for providing first aid to protesters and even prevented from receiving their study transcripts that would enable them to continue their studies abroad. Student and other young activists calling for an end to the bombing of the Gaza Strip by Israel came under scrutiny in the United States of America and elsewhere, with campuses taking disciplinary action against them. Young human rights defenders have shared that while they have been participating in peaceful demonstrations, police have questioned them about where they were enrolled as students and threatened that they would ask the principal to expel them. Others have been publicly shamed by their teachers in front of their peers for participating in protests.

37. Schools often contact parents to inform them about their children's human rights activities and threaten suspension or expulsion, which in turn leads the parents to pressure young activists to abandon their human rights work. Some participants in the consultations said that they chose to keep their human rights work hidden from their parents.

38. Promoting free speech in school settings is especially important, as many children first learn of human rights through school subjects and after-school activities, and children's voices are particularly powerful when united.²⁰ Education on human rights is an important stepping stone in this regard, also providing information about human rights activism. However, in recent years there has been tangible pushback against human rights education in some countries, in particular in relation to sexual and reproductive health and to issues for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons. Consequently, activists working in these areas have experienced a reduction in their civic space.

39. Youth human rights defenders in Thailand have demonstrated the influence and power of young advocates and the challenges that they face in academic settings. Since 2020, students at university and secondary school have peacefully protested for democratic reform. Some protestors in Thailand call themselves the "Bad Students" in acknowledgement of the abuse and retaliation that they face from teachers.²¹ The Bad Students protest against abusive punishments in classrooms, discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer students, and other forms of harassment. Students have reported that police officers come into their schools and take pictures of children in order to deter them from protesting. While the Bad Students are advocating school reform, they are also part of a larger campaign protesting authoritarian rule in Thailand.

²⁰ See <https://srdefenders.org/information/meeting-with-child-and-youth-human-rights-defenders-from-moldova/>.

²¹ See Sunai Phasuk, "Thailand's 'Bad Students' are rising up for democracy and change", Human Rights Watch, 17 September 2020.

40. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, student activists and student union leaders have been subjected to prison sentences and expelled from universities for their participation in peaceful protests and campaigns against the death penalty and for women's rights, among other causes.²²

5. Intimidation and harassment in online spaces and the media

41. Child and youth human rights defenders often face significant challenges such as slander, propaganda, cyberbullying and defamation, particularly in online spaces, including on social media. Young defenders also often face negative coverage in the traditional media, perpetuated by biases, which minimizes the impact of their work. The voices of children and youth are often channelled through adults in the media, and young people are not considered valid sources of information.²³ In other contexts, young human rights defenders are not featured in the media at all owing to control by the Government.²⁴

42. Although these violations are experienced by human rights defenders of every age, the impact on young defenders, especially on children, can be particularly acute as they may not yet have built up the same levels of resilience, established the same networks of support or had exposure to the same opportunities for capacity-building as their older counterparts. Additionally, according to one young woman human rights defender from Myanmar, "the younger you are, the more likely you are to use the digital world, as it makes you a better advocate" and consequently more vulnerable to attack.

43. Female child and youth human rights defenders often face additional, gendered attacks online. Some girls and young women have reported threats and violence, including bullying, which often also targeted their families and friends and were aimed at silencing their voices.²⁵ During the consultations, many stated that they expect to be attacked and verbally abused and to meet resistance. These young defenders, especially young women and girls, are also at a high risk of being subjected to doxing. The prevalence of online sexual violence further exacerbates their vulnerability.

44. Digital technologies can be used to harass, control, blackmail or humiliate young women and girls, including through the release of private content or the use of deepfakes. Such abuse can silence the victims or lead them to engage in self-censorship or to leave social media platforms and digital spaces altogether, further contributing to the restriction of their civic space. While these types of violations are committed against men and boys too, the gendered and intersectional impact on young women and girl human rights defenders can be particularly profound.

6. Ageism, legitimacy and political discrediting

45. A recurring issue raised by child and youth human rights defenders was their feeling of not being taken seriously by adult-led organizations, government institutions, intergovernmental organizations and society as a whole. Lack of recognition and credibility due to their age may affect all aspects of their human rights advocacy, including impeding access to resources and opportunities. Because they are less visible, have had fewer opportunities to receive training, have access to fewer resources and are likely to be less experienced, child and youth human rights defenders do not tend to be seen as legitimate actors to consult and include. Recognition is one of the key components mentioned during the consultations that are necessary to overcome the challenges faced by child and youth defenders. As one young activist said, they need more than tolerance: they need respect.

46. Many have faced demeaning and belittling remarks, questioning their experience, expertise and motivation. Others have been confronted by the closed mentality of older generations. They are often left out of decision-making processes at the local, national and

²² See communication IRN 17/2023, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28477>.

²³ See submission from the office of Amnesty International in Argentina.

²⁴ See submission from a young human rights defender from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

²⁵ A/HRC/50/25, para. 37.

international levels, or when they are included, their participation might be mere tokenism or a box-ticking exercise.

47. This phenomenon can be further compounded by political narratives that use the age of child and youth human rights defenders to imply that they are being manipulated, recruited or brainwashed. For instance, in Colombia young defenders were smeared by people accusing them of being associated with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army.

48. Child and youth defenders face significant barriers, including gatekeeping by adult-led groups controlling access to resources and opportunities. This gatekeeping perpetuates an unequal power dynamic, limiting the involvement of child and youth defenders in decision-making processes and hindering their ability to fully engage in advocacy efforts. Furthermore, ageism within the sector leads to the expectation that young defenders should work for free or for minimal compensation, in disregard for their time, skills and expertise. This exploitative attitude devalues their work and undermines the sustainability of youth-led initiatives. Reluctance to transfer power to young defenders further marginalizes them, impeding their capacity to influence policies and bring about transformative change.

49. Ageism can also coincide with the sexual exploitation of young women and girls. In a case reported during the consultations, an adult male human rights defender appeared to be grooming those whom he was supposed to be educating.

50. Under favourable circumstances, however, young defenders serve as bridges between generations, effectively passing the torch of activism and empowering future leaders.²⁶

7. Impact on and of family environments

51. Families and immediate communities are the most important reference frameworks, especially for child human rights defenders. They need to rely on their families as support systems to be able to carry out human rights activism, both in terms of financial capital and resources, and in terms of immaterial support and often agreement, to fully realize their ability to defend human rights.

52. Child and youth human rights defenders often find themselves facing isolation from family and friends owing to the nature of their work.

53. In some cases, parents and family members significantly deter young defenders, or forbid them outright, from engaging in human rights activism, as it may be seen as politically, economically or socially risky not just for the human rights defender concerned, but for the entire family.

54. In other cases, while recognizing the importance of the human rights work, parents sometimes feel anxious about the risks involved, such as harassment, threats or even violence directed at young defenders and their families. For instance, some young defenders whose parents work in the public sector were forbidden by their parents from participating in protests. At the same time, the families of child and youth human rights defenders often become targets of harassment, discrimination and retribution owing to their loved ones’ activism.

55. Advocating human rights in hostile environments may also hinder the future prospects of young activists, including employment, housing and government benefits, forcing them to make difficult choices. Some have reported instances of background checks, where employers saw human right work as a barrier to employment.

8. Access to resources and resource mobilization

56. Child and youth human rights defenders often face significant challenges related to access to resources. They often lack the capacity and experience necessary to apply for funding opportunities and to comply with complicated reporting requirements to donors. Without adequate financial support, young defenders often struggle to sustain their initiatives,

²⁶ See Tala Odeh, “Empowering the voices of tomorrow: young human rights defenders”, August 2023. Available at <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2023/08/tala-odeh/>.

which impedes their ability to reach out to communities, raise awareness and mobilize for change. Moreover, without funding, they may be unable to gain access to essential training and capacity-building programmes that would enhance their skills and expertise.

57. In countries where NGOs have been dissolved or shut down under national security or counter-terrorism laws, it is impossible not only to register a civil society organization, but also to receive funding from foreign donors. Some human rights defenders are working in disputed territories or areas under occupation, where their human rights work carries additional risks and there are no possibilities for registering their organizations or receiving donor support.

58. Child and youth human rights defenders have repeatedly expressed the need for flexible, accessible and sustained funding opportunities. Such funding should be accessible to unregistered organizations and movements, and available in crisis and conflict situations.

9. Mental health and psychosocial well-being

59. The impact of human rights activism and the related pressures on child and youth defenders are often not adequately taken into account, resulting in a lack of adequate psychosocial support mechanisms and mental health initiatives aimed specifically at these age groups. Most child and youth human rights defenders carry out their human rights work informally, on a voluntary basis and outside of formal structures and paid contracts. Some even support their activism from other incomes. As a result, few resources, if any, are available for their mental health and well-being, despite increased recognition of the importance thereof.

60. Activists must also cope with the distress caused by threats to their safety and security and with the psychological burden of regular exposure to social injustices.²⁷ Many of them have highlighted the general lack of self-care among young human rights defenders and the overall impact of the mental health crisis. In some regions, especially in the Americas, collective self-care has been at the forefront, and this approach is now being adopted in other regions as well.

10. Impact of anti-rights groups

61. Anti-rights groups are actively misinterpreting well-established international norms and standards, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to suppress the work of child and youth human rights defenders. This is especially apparent in the restrictive, and often misleading, interpretation of the “best interests of the child” under article 3 (1) of the Convention, and in the use of traditional family values as an argument to suppress certain agendas, such as activism on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex issues and feminist activism.

62. Claims to be acting in the “best interests of the child” or to be promoting the safety of and respect for the family, or some combination of these rationales, can easily serve as a ready-made justification to give suppressive action a veneer of legitimacy. State and non-State actors alike have used such rationales to implement, maintain or otherwise permit various practices that violate well-established norms and standards of international law, sometimes explicitly invoking and misinterpreting key provisions. Much of this stems from the relative vagueness of this provision, especially when read in abstraction from the rest of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant international law, norms and standards.

63. Some have gone so far as to contend that article 3 (1) was conceived at a time when the child was perceived as more object than subject, and that when given too much weight it serves not to protect the rights of children but often to provide licence to abrogate them.²⁸

²⁷ See CIVICUS, “Youth activism”.

²⁸ See Ursula Kilkelly, “The best interests of the child: a gateway to children’s rights?”, in *Implementing Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Best Interests, Welfare and Well-being*, Eliane E. Sutherland and Lesley-Anne Barnes Macfarlane, eds. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017).

The primary concern is that States will curtail the rights of children, and even adults, under the pretext that they are acting in the best interests of the child.

64. In the context of backlash against activism on gender equality, girls and young women who are human rights defenders face increased risks of harassment and violence when engaging on related themes, particularly sexual and reproductive rights, equality in marriage and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer issues. In addition, girls and young women may face domestic violence, including sexual violence, as a reprisal for their activism or may be separated from their children by their partners and family as a form of punishment. In some cases, they have to choose between pursuing their activism or keeping family ties.²⁹

B. Legal, administrative and practical barriers to participation in civic space

65. Young people are one of the five groups most commonly exposed to assaults on their fundamental freedoms in civic space.³⁰

66. Existing laws for the protection of human rights defenders do not take into account the specific needs of child and youth human rights defenders. These laws are frequently designed with a focus on adult defenders, neglecting the unique vulnerabilities and challenges faced by young defenders involved in human rights work. The lack of age-appropriate provisions leaves young defenders without adequate support or recourse, making them more susceptible to threats and harassment. There are, however, encouraging developments, such as a project in the Republic of Moldova, running from November 2022 to October 2024, which aims to enhance child participation. The Republic of Moldova is currently the only country in the world where a soon-to-be-developed law on the protection of human rights defenders has a high chance of incorporating the child rights perspective and the distinct barriers faced by child human rights defenders.³¹

67. Despite the rights of children to express their views and to be heard and their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as outlined in articles 12, 13, and 15 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, some States have created laws arbitrarily limiting these rights based on age. Although the Convention provides for some limitations on the rights to freedom of association and of assembly, these limitations must be both in conformity with law and necessary, meaning that there must be justification for introducing limiting laws. The main concern is that some States provide neither justification for nor analysis as to the necessity of their age-based limiting laws within the scope of the Convention, and that these laws are purely and arbitrarily based on age.³²

1. Freedom of association

68. Restrictive age limits for registering non-profit organizations or opening organizational bank accounts can also contribute to limiting the right of child and youth human rights defenders to freedom of association, making it difficult, and in some cases impossible, to participate in political and public decision-making processes, gain access to funding and be able to work transparently.

69. Under article 3 of the Associations Act in Turkey, the minimum age at which children may found associations is 16 years.³³ However, the Committee on the Rights of the Child found that there are still extensively difficult bureaucratic procedures for children to form organizations. In Lebanon, membership of associations is limited to individuals over the age

²⁹ A/HRC/50/25, para. 38.

³⁰ See CIVICUS, "People power under attack: a report based on data from the CIVICUS Monitor", December 2019.

³¹ See <https://childrightsconnect.org/for-the-first-time-ever-children-will-inform-the-development-and-implementation-of-a-new-law-on-the-protection-of-human-rights-defenders-this-is-our-project-in-moldova/>.

³² See Nico Brando and Laura Lundy, "Discrimination and children's right to freedom of association and assembly", *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 2 December 2022.

³³ See <https://kayapartner.com/en/turkish-law-on-association-association-act-in-turkey/>.

of 21 years. A 2019 law in the Russian Federation prohibits adults from encouraging those under 18 years to take part in “unauthorized protest”. A similar measure was introduced in Canada in 2022. In the United States, many school districts threatened repercussions for children who intended to join the protests in favour of reforming gun laws after the shooting in Parkland, Florida.

70. In Kuwait, Act No. 24 of 1962 stipulates that a person must be over 18 years old to establish a club or society.³⁴ In Hungary, children under the age of 14 years may not hold managerial positions in associations created by children. In Costa Rica, the Code on Children and Adolescents states that those under the age of 18 years do not have freedom of association for political or lucrative activities. The Committee on the Rights of the Child found that in Viet Nam, while children have the formal possibility to form associations, in practice children’s freedom of association is severely restricted.³⁵ In Japan, minors may not join associations without parental consent.

71. In some countries, NGOs have been dissolved or shut down, often based on vague provisions of national security and counter-terrorism legislation. Organizing and gaining access to funding becomes impossible under such conditions, with a compounding impact on youth-led organizations and movements.

72. The main concern with these laws, as acknowledged by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, is that they are too expansive and lack the nuanced justifications required under article 15 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child for limiting the exercise of the rights of children to freedom of association and of peaceful assembly. Article 15 of the Convention states that limits on the rights of the child to freedom of association and peaceful assembly are justified only when they are imposed in conformity with the law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (*ordre public*), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. Blanket restrictions based solely on age should not be applied in situations where national security or public health, order, safety or morals are not at risk. Such arbitrary and broad laws that limit the rights of children to freedom of association on the basis of age therefore violate the Convention.

73. Financial institutions and registration authorities may be reluctant to recognize youth- or child-led organizations, viewing them as inexperienced or incapable of fulfilling requirements. Even in countries where no such formal legal barriers exist, the bureaucratic procedures and complicated paperwork may in practice significantly deter and hinder young activists. As a consequence, their initiatives may remain informal or unrecognized, limiting their potential impact and credibility.

74. Organizing, associating and assembling constitute the backbone to defending human rights in a peaceful manner. Ensuring that children can freely organize, associate and assemble is therefore a first and crucial step to encouraging, empowering and allowing child human rights defenders.

2. Freedom of assembly

75. In some countries, child human rights defenders face legal barriers to the exercise of their right to freedom of assembly, owing to blanket bans on children participating in public assemblies.³⁶ Furthermore, in the case of child and youth human rights defenders with disabilities, there are often additional barriers often in the deprivation of legal capacity.

76. However, both child defenders and youth defenders are, through the use of various legal measures, including administrative codes, increasingly discouraged from taking action. Some have faced arbitrary arrest following their participation in protests and were remanded in custody.

77. In other instances, police and other authorities use intimidating tactics to discourage child and youth defenders from participating in assemblies, including taking photos of the

³⁴ [CRC/C/KWT/CO/2](#), para. 39.

³⁵ [CRC/C/VNM/CO/3-4](#), para. 41.

³⁶ [A/HRC/26/29](#), para. 24.

activists gathered or arresting protest participants under legislation on child protection.³⁷ Those detained in juvenile detention centres following arrests due to their participation in protests often do not have access to lawyers.

78. As young generations of human rights defenders adopt civil disobedience as a key tactic to promote and defend human rights, States are taking an increasingly hard line in dealing with the right to freedom of assembly, and therefore young human rights defenders risk being criminalized for their activism. Acts of civil disobedience, particularly prevalent in climate action, have been met with increased administrative and criminal consequences all over the world. Governments have used administrative and misdemeanour laws, as well as criminal laws, to prevent and punish such acts.

79. For instance, on 1 April 2022, following increased climate protest activity in New South Wales, Australia, the state parliament introduced new laws and penalties specifically targeting protests that blocked roads and ports. Protesters can now be fined up to 22,000 Australian dollars (15,250 United States dollars) and be jailed for up to two years for protesting without permission on public roads, rail lines, tunnels, bridges or industrial estates. On 13 April 2022, Violet (Deanna) Coco, a 31-year-old activist, took part in a climate protest that stopped traffic in one lane on Sydney Harbour Bridge. She climbed onto the roof of a parked truck and stood holding a lit emergency flare. She was charged with disrupting vehicles, interfering with the safe operation of a bridge, possessing a bright light distress signal in a public place, failing to comply with police direction and resisting or hindering a police officer. She was also charged under explosives regulations for holding the emergency flare; with an incitement offence for “encouraging the commission of a crime” by livestreaming the protest on Facebook; for uploading a video that she had taken of a climate protest the previous week; and for disrupting traffic during three previous protests.³⁸

80. On 25 September 2020, Ugandan police in Kampala arrested eight youth climate activists who were participating in a global climate strike. The police told them that election campaigns were not allowed, although the activists repeatedly explained that they were an environmental – not a political – movement. The activists, only two of whom were over the age of 18 years, were detained in a room for eight hours, questioned, and then allowed to leave.³⁹

81. It is important to note that, as confirmed by the Human Rights Committee in its general comment No. 37 (2020), collective civil disobedience or direct-action campaigns can be covered by article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, provided that they are non-violent.

3. Freedom of expression

82. Under article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. In reality, however, the children’s freedom of expression is significantly restricted, by parents, academic institutions, the police and other authorities, and society as a whole. Child and youth defenders often lack the spaces and opportunities to freely express their views and be heard without negative repercussions and in a meaningful manner.

83. In February 2021, Indian authorities arrested Disha Ravi, a 21-year-old a Bengaluru-based activist who volunteered for Fridays for Future, on charges including sedition and criminal conspiracy. The authorities alleged that Ms. Ravi was the “key conspirator” in editing and sharing an online toolkit – also shared by the Swedish founder of Fridays for Future, Greta Thunberg – on social media, including Twitter, aimed at providing information to those seeking to peacefully support ongoing farmers protests. In granting bail to Ms. Ravi, the court in Delhi noted that the evidence on record was “scanty and sketchy”, and that citizens could not be jailed simply because they disagreed with government policies.⁴⁰

³⁷ See submission from Anna Annanon, a youth activist from Thailand.

³⁸ See submission from Human Rights Watch.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

84. Pervasive surveillance, both online and offline, has a profound impact on the ability to carry out human rights work. Some young defenders have reported being on a watch list and being followed, leading to a chilling effect on the broader community.

4. Public participation

85. At the national and international levels, there is a lack of sufficient spaces to systematically involve child and youth human rights defenders in decision-making processes. While child and youth human rights defenders play a critical role in advocating human rights, their voices are often marginalized or excluded from important discussions and policymaking arenas. The absence of dedicated platforms and opportunities for meaningful participation hinders their ability to influence policies that directly affect their lives and the well-being of their communities.

86. The absence of child-friendly versions of policies among Governments and intergovernmental organizations significantly undermines the ability of child human rights defenders to conduct their work effectively. Policy documents are often complex, filled with legal jargon and difficult for children to engage with. The lack of simplified and accessible versions may deprive some young defenders of the information and understanding necessary to advocate their rights and hold authorities accountable.

87. Child and youth human rights defenders are often only tokenistically engaged by a range of adult actors, including adult-led civil society organizations and Governments, or their participation faces numerous obstacles. Even at the level of the United Nations and other regional and international organizations, there remains a notable lack of sufficient spaces to systematically involve child and youth human rights defenders in decision-making processes.

88. Even when formal opportunities for the participation of child and youth human rights defenders are in place, they are still unable to avail of such opportunities in practice owing to lack of sufficient resources to travel to institutions headquartered in the global North, or other restrictions, including visa policies. Some young defenders have expressed frustration at the lack of systematic support from the organizers of events to which child and youth defenders have been invited to obtain visas, and stressed that letters in support of visas are often helpful and result in less hassle at airports or border controls.

89. Participation is often open only to formally registered groups that have also been accredited to a given organization, such as the requirement that NGOs be in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council in order to participate in most United Nations meetings, which creates an important barrier to the participation of individual child and youth defenders and those working as part of informal coalitions and networks.

90. The absence of opportunities for public participation can lead to a sense of isolation and frustration, as child and youth defenders miss out on building strategic alliances and staying informed about the latest developments in the human rights field.

91. Increasingly, there are also positive examples of participation by young people in decision-making. In Armenia, for instance, draft laws concerning children and amendments to those laws are discussed with children and young people.⁴¹ Another noteworthy practice was the National Youth Assembly on Climate, convened in Ireland in March 2023.⁴²

5. Criminal and administrative charges

92. Child and youth child human rights defenders have experienced further shrinking of the spaces available to them. This decrease in enabling environments can take many forms, such as the application of laws on national security or counter-terrorism to restrict legitimate forms of expression, new restrictions on freedom of assembly and the broad application of misdemeanour laws.

93. As the Special Rapporteur has mentioned in her previous reports, this shrinking of civic space also entails the criminalization of solidarity, which is one of the areas in which

⁴¹ See submission from the Human Rights Defender of Armenia.

⁴² See <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/3fd5d-national-youth-assembly-on-climate-2023/>.

young activists are actively involved. One activist stated the following during the consultations: “What we are doing is seen by many as illegal. But what we are doing is more than the law: we are fighting for equality and justice, and criminal sanction[s] will not stop us.”

94. Some young activists have reported the instrumentalization of the judiciary against young people, as they are remanded for often minor violations and are required to report to the police on a regular basis.

95. Kamile Wayit, an Uighur student, was taken away by the police on 12 December 2022, after she returned to her home in Atush, in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China, after a holiday. In November 2022, she had posted a video on the social media platform WeChat about the “A4 protests” being held across China to express opposition to the Government’s “zero-COVID” policy against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the resulting lockdowns. Soon after that, her father received a warning call from the police and she deleted the post, believed to be one of the reasons for her detention. She has been sentenced to three years’ imprisonment for “promoting extremism”, and it is believed that she is now being held at Kashgar Mush Women’s Prison.⁴³

6. Human rights violations against child and youth human rights defenders

96. Many child and youth human rights defenders have reported their concerns and experiences about human rights violations committed against them and their family members. These include torture and ill-treatment, enforced disappearance, forced displacement and sexual violence.⁴⁴ The use of violence is a strategy used by both State and non-State actors to spread fear among young activists. These serious violations are usually underreported and not followed up by adequate accountability mechanisms.

7. Girls and young women who are human rights defenders

97. Entrenched patriarchy compounds oppression for young women human rights defenders, exacerbating the challenges that they face in their activism. As young defenders advocating human rights, girls and young women not only confront systemic injustices but also grapple with gender-based discrimination and gender norms that seek to silence and marginalize them. These and other patriarchal structures in society reinforce traditional gender roles and limit the agency and visibility of young women human rights defenders, hindering their efforts to effect meaningful change. They often encounter additional barriers to access to resources, leadership positions and decision-making spaces, further restricting their ability to challenge patriarchal power dynamics. Girls and young women who are human rights defenders may also have fewer opportunities for access to education than their male peers and face discrimination in academic settings and in their public participation.

98. In some countries, young women activists face restrictions on their mobility and travel, as they are required to be accompanied by male guardians. Some have reported resorting to using medical needs or education-related requirements as excuses to be able to travel. Others have said that they are judged based on their dress and appearance and are harassed in schools.

99. Girls and young women who are human rights defenders also face violence, including sexual violence, for their human rights work. In Argentina in 2018, a 15-year-old pro-choice activist was violently attacked on the street by two men, who cut her face with a razor and stated that she would be unable to walk down the street anymore. The young activist recognized her attackers since they had previously threatened her on the social media platform Instagram.⁴⁵

100. Funding for women’s rights has decreased over recent years, in part also owing to anti-rights movements gaining ground and the election of conservative and far-right Governments. At the same time, the new funding window under the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund is a positive development, countering these negative trends.

⁴³ See submission from Amnesty International.

⁴⁴ See Izsák-Ndiaye, *If I Disappear*.

⁴⁵ See submission from the office of Amnesty International in Argentina.

101. Young women human rights defenders in Azerbaijan are speaking out to champion women’s human rights, including their rights to freedom of expression and of association. For example, in July 2021, young journalist Fatima Movlamli wrote about the leaking of private pictures and videos of her in April 2019 on social media platform Telegram, on the same channels that had targeted the organizers of a march on International Women’s Day.⁴⁶

102. Under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, States parties are required to take measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country, and to ensure that women have the right, on equal terms with men, to participate in the formulation of government policy and in NGOs and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country (art. 7), and in the work of international organizations (art. 8). States parties are also required to ensure equal access to educational opportunities without regard to gender (art. 10), and to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women on a basis of equality with men (art. 3). The relevant provisions of that Convention, taken together with those of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, provide an extremely strong legal framework for the participation of women and girls in civic space. In reality, however, practical and legal barriers persist, as illustrated above.

VI. Successes and achievements of child and youth human rights defenders

103. As also illustrated in the previous report of the Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council, on the achievements of human rights defenders in the 25 years that had passed since the adoption of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders,⁴⁷ many innovative and groundbreaking successes in human rights have been achieved by child and youth activists. The examples provided below are but the tip of the iceberg.

A. Legislative initiatives and strategic litigation

104. In Ecuador, nine girls, aged between 11 and 18 years, from the Provinces of Sucumbíos and Orellana in the Ecuadorian Amazon initiated a legal process in 2020 against the practice of gas flaring and its contribution to global warming. In 2021, the plaintiffs succeeded in getting Sucumbíos Provincial Court of Justice to rule that the flares be progressively shut down. However, the responsible authorities have not implemented this ruling. In January 2023, the Minister of Energy and Mines intimidated the plaintiffs, claiming that they had made up a scandal in order to obtain money and had portrayed the State-owned oil company, Petroecuador, as “a dragon throwing fire at some defenceless girls”.⁴⁸

105. On 27 September 2023, six young people from Portugal submitted a landmark case to the European Court of Human Rights, alleging that countries were breaching their human rights by failing to do enough to protect them from climate change.⁴⁹ If the applicants are successful, the 27 member States of the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Switzerland, Norway, the Russian Federation and Turkey could be legally required to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

106. Maung Sawyeddollah, a 22-year-old Rohingya refugee and youth activist, fled Myanmar in 2017 with his family to escape ethnic cleansing. Since then, he has been living in a refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, in southern Bangladesh. He is involved in a lawsuit against Meta – then named Facebook, and now the company that owns Facebook – demanding justice for his community, including 1 million dollars in reparations to fund educational projects in

⁴⁶ See Fatima Movlamli, “Fatima Movlamli, Azerbaijani activist”, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 18 July 2021.

⁴⁷ [A/HRC/52/29](#).

⁴⁸ See submission from Amnesty International.

⁴⁹ See Amnesty International, “Six young people to present landmark climate case before the European Court of Human Rights”, 26 September 2023.

refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Meta, whose business model fuelled the spread of harmful content, including incitement to violence, has so far failed to meet the demands of communities affected.⁵⁰

107. Mariam Oyiza Aliyu, a young woman human rights defender from the north-west of Nigeria, where girls are often forced to marry early, is founder and executive director of the Learning Through Skills Acquisition Initiative. She and her organization have successfully reintegrated young women held by Boko Haram into their communities, and have won 55 cases of rape in court. Some 175 cases are currently pending in court. She attributes her success to understanding the State's policy and using the judiciary to counter it. Her organization has also developed partnerships with various line ministries and international organizations.

108. In Botswana, Letsweletse Motshidiemang took the Government to court to challenge the constitutionality of the State's laws against homosexuality. As a result of the campaigning and strategic litigation, the Government announced that it would enforce a court decision to repeal the country's laws on sodomy, and that it expected to table a bill amending the Penal Code to decriminalize homosexuality.

B. Community-building, networking and skill-sharing

109. Many child and youth human rights defenders consider community-building and networking essential to their human rights work. Such networks and connections not only provide an additional layer of protection, but also are powerful opportunities for peer learning and skill-sharing. The Special Rapporteur heard numerous examples of cross-learning by young activists with regard to their security and safety, but also to practical skills such as operating call centres.

110. It is useful to exchange experience and create alliances in order to learn how best to respond to certain situations. For example, young feminists in Honduras have been learning from similar activists in Mexico and Colombia, while young defenders in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela have learned from their peers in Zimbabwe.

VII. Best practices

111. In March 2019, the Assembly of Albania approved a resolution on recognition and support of the activity of human rights defenders. Through this resolution, the Assembly committed to encouraging the relevant institutions to train and protect human rights defenders, train police officers and other service providers, at all levels, on the role and activity of human rights defenders, educate and train students on the role of human rights defenders and ensure the professional preparation and training of teachers.⁵¹

112. In several countries, including Albania, formal student governments or youth parliaments have been set up by law to ensure the involvement of children in school processes.

113. In 2022 in Armenia, the Public Council on Child and Youth Rights was established by the Office of the Human Rights Defender. It consists of 21 members from all provinces in the country, selected on the basis of pre-announced criteria.⁵²

114. In April 2023, the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children adopted an ad hoc position statement on recognizing and strengthening the protection of child human rights defenders.⁵³ It expressed grave concerns about repeated violations that child human rights defenders reportedly faced by acting in the public eye.

⁵⁰ See Amnesty International, *The Social Atrocity: Meta and the Right to Remedy for the Rohingya* (London, 2022).

⁵¹ See submission from the People's Advocate of Albania.

⁵² See submission from the Human Rights Defender of Armenia.

⁵³ Available at <https://enoc.eu/enoc-statement-on-recognising-and-strengthening-the-protection-of-child-human-rights-defenders/>.

115. In Brazil, the National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents was set up, as a permanent collegiate body that is deliberative in character. It is an integral part of the basic structure of the Ministry of Human Rights and plays a fundamental role in the rights protection system. It provides for the participation of adolescents, although they do not have the right to vote in the collegiate body.⁵⁴

116. Also in Brazil, a programme for the protection of children and adolescents who have received death threats was created in 2003 to provide assistance to children and adolescents at risk owing to their involvement in the defence of human rights. The programme coordinates the efforts of the federal Government, state and municipal authorities, civil society organizations and international agencies to provide protection measures, including temporary relocation, psychosocial support and legal assistance.⁵⁵

VIII. Recommendations

117. On national and international protection mechanisms and standards, the Special Rapporteur recommends that States and, as appropriate, other relevant stakeholders:

- (a) **Adopt specific laws and policies enhancing protection for child and youth human rights defenders at the national level;**
- (b) **Advocate laws that recognize and protect child and youth human rights defenders and their families;**
- (c) **Explicitly refer to child and youth human rights defenders in model draft laws on human rights defenders;**
- (d) **Strengthen digital protection and security with regard to online human rights violations, promoting digital security opportunities for child and youth human rights defenders;**
- (e) **Provide pro bono legal services for child and youth human rights defenders affected by legal challenges;**
- (f) **Provide mandatory, age-appropriate and interactive education on human rights, including children's rights, and human rights defenders, beginning in the early years, continuing through school and extending to further education and professional development, and include in the curriculum information about available mechanisms of remedy and support.**

118. On increasing participation in public and political affairs, the Special Rapporteur recommends that States:

- (a) **Create specific national policies for systematically and meaningfully involving child and youth human rights defenders in decision-making processes;**
- (b) **Establish complaints mechanisms for child and youth human rights defenders to seek redress or recourse at the national level;**
- (c) **Ensure that reporting systems for human rights violations are easily accessible by children and young people;**
- (d) **Develop institutional and quantifiable markers to ensure the inclusion of and data collection on child and youth human rights defenders.**

119. On increasing participation in United Nations processes, the Special Rapporteur recommends that the United Nations and the international community:

- (a) **Create specific policies to systematically involve child and youth human rights defenders in United Nations decision-making processes;**
- (b) **Establish complaints mechanisms for child and youth human rights defenders to seek redress or recourse at the international level, and make the existing**

⁵⁴ See submission from the Alana Institute.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

mechanisms accessible, child-friendly and responsive to the specific needs and challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders;

(c) Ensure that reporting systems for human rights violations are easily accessible by children and young people;

(d) Develop institutional and quantifiable markers to ensure the inclusion of and data collection on child and youth human rights defenders;

(e) Reserve places for children and young people in international delegations to ensure their representation in global forums;

(f) Create OHCHR forums for the systematic participation of child and youth human rights defenders, including in its regional offices;

(g) Ensure that international and national norms, laws and regulations relevant to child and youth human rights defenders are available in child-friendly, accessible versions.

120. On supporting collaboration and alliances, the Special Rapporteur recommends that States, international organizations and other relevant stakeholders:

(a) Raise awareness among child and youth human rights defenders of existing practices, platforms and protection mechanisms for reporting human rights violations and for seeking support;

(b) Foster working alliances and strategic partnerships to amplify the impact of child and youth human rights defenders' work;

(c) Create a platform whereby child and youth organizations can collaborate without competition with larger, adult-led groups;

(d) Establish at the national level a coalition of human rights defenders representing children and youth.

121. On increasing capacity development, the Special Rapporteur recommends that States, international organizations and other relevant stakeholders host practical workshops and provide education on human rights to equip child and youth human rights defenders with the necessary skills relating to advocacy, security and protection.

122. On addressing entrenched ageism in the human rights movement, the Special Rapporteur recommends that civil society organizations and other relevant stakeholders:

(a) Promote intergenerational collaboration and mentorship within the human rights community;

(b) Encourage larger NGOs to support and collaborate with new initiatives by human rights defenders and smaller organizations that are child- or youth-led;

(c) Address exploitation and ageism within civil society organizations to create better space for child and youth human rights defenders.

123. On countering negative narratives and increasing global advocacy on the issue of child and youth human rights defenders, the Special Rapporteur recommends that States, international organizations and other relevant stakeholders:

(a) Challenge negative media coverage by promoting a realistic public image of child and youth human rights defenders;

(b) Give visibility to the work of child and youth human rights defenders;

(c) Engage with social media companies to develop policies that protect child and youth human rights defenders online;

(d) Show solidarity and provide support through letter-writing campaigns and public denouncement of abuses against child and youth human rights defenders;

(e) Include in international campaigns supporting affected child and youth human rights defenders financial support and support for families.

124. **On addressing academic sanctions, the Special Rapporteur recommends that States:**

- (a) **Limit the discretion of educational institutions to expel or otherwise sanction students for engaging in legitimate human rights activism;**
- (b) **Provide scholarships for young human rights defenders who have been expelled from school to continue their studies elsewhere;**
- (c) **Ensure that accredited universities are denied access to global benefits if they persecute youth human rights defenders;**
- (d) **Train education providers in basic international human rights standards so that they can better understand the work of child and youth human rights defenders;**
- (e) **Establish scholarship programmes to support young human rights defenders in their education and development.**

125. **On increasing documentation of restrictions on the rights of child and youth human rights defenders, the Special Rapporteur recommends that States engage in better data collection in relation to violations against child and youth defenders, including by recording their age and whether they are under the age of 18 years.**

126. **On removing unwarranted restrictions on banking and registration procedures, the Special Rapporteur recommends that States:**

- (a) **Improve the accessibility of banking systems to child and youth human rights defenders;**
- (b) **Remove existing legal barriers to freedom of association for child and youth human rights defenders by amending existing laws that impose restrictive age limits for setting up and registering their organizations.**

127. **The Special Rapporteur recommends that States and other relevant stakeholders extend well-being and self-care opportunities to child and youth human rights defenders.**

128. **On protection measures, the Special Rapporteur recommends that:**

- (a) **The Committee on the Rights of the Child systematically include in its concluding observations on the reports of States parties specific recommendations on child human rights defenders;**
 - (b) **Special procedure mandate holders systematically engage with child and youth human right defenders in their thematic work and consultations and during country visits.**
-