



## NAJAT MAALLA M'JID

Special Representative  
of the United Nations  
Secretary-General on  
Violence against Children

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen Dear colleagues,

Dear children and adolescents,

I would like to thank the Government of Colombia and the Inter-American Children's Institute for inviting me to the 22nd Pan American Congress on Children and Adolescents.

I am delighted to join this important meeting that brings together Governments, civil society organizations and children from the Americas to strengthen the protection of children's rights, in particular their freedom from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.

This is the first time for me to address a meeting of the Organization of American States since I was appointed Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General this July.

My role is to be a global independent advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children and to be a bridge builder between all those who work on this issue. That is why I am so pleased to be at this Congress to learn about the progress being made in this region and to spread the lessons learnt across the world.

**2019 is a milestone year in moving towards realizing the ambitious vision of the 2030 Agenda.** In particular target 16.2 on the elimination of all forms of violence against children and other key targets within SDG4, SDG5, SDG8, SDG 10 that deal with specific aspects of violence.

At the **United Nations High-level Political Forum** three months ago, Governments, civil society and the United Nations system gathered together to assess progress and shortfalls in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

And a month ago, in New York, Head of States and Governments gathered at the **SDG Summit**, where States identified the urgent need to accelerate action towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.

**2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.** The Convention enshrines the right of all children to reach their full potential, free from violence, neglect, exploitation and abuse. Effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda will help keep that promise. As violence has a high negative impact on every aspect of development, the 2030 Agenda treats it as a cross-cutting concern.

**30 years after Convention on the Rights of Children was adopted, 10 years after the UN mandate on ending violence against children was created and 4 years after the SDGs were adopted, where are we now?**

To help answer this question, earlier this year my office launched a new report, **Keeping the Promise – Ending Violence against Children by 2030**. This report is based on a wide range of contributions from organizations and individuals in the UN system, regional organizations – including partners in this region such the Inter-American Institute Children's Institute, MERCOSUR, SICA and the MMI LAC-, as well as civil society, experts and high-level advocates and children themselves.

The report highlights that **there is progress** on stronger legal and policy frameworks, more and better-quality data and solid evidence on what works to end violence. There is also a greater coherence and coordination amongst different stakeholders working for the wellbeing of children, growing partnerships and coalitions, including with the most important allies of all: children themselves.

**In this region, progress has been** achieved in the last 10 years -in terms of legislation, policies and at slow pace also on data collection-.

- We know there are 10 countries with a legislation prohibiting all forms of violence against children – and others like Colombia have ongoing law reform processes-, many countries have approved or are in the process of developing a national strategy to end violence against children aligned with the SDGs (Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay are some examples), countries like El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti and now Colombia have collected data on violence against children.

**However, the report also illustrates that progress is slow**, too slow for us to be able to keep our promise to the world's children to live free from violence by 2030. We need a greater sense of urgency for action!

**Violence against children remains hidden** and pervasive and undermines the achievement of the SDGs and full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Violence against children is a global phenomenon, **however this region shows particularly high statistics:**

- 67 adolescents are victims of homicide daily;
- 240 000 children in the region live in institutional care centres and 10% of these are under three years of age. The majority of these children are there as a result of violence and poverty;
- 1.1 million adolescent girls 15 to 19 years of age have experienced sexual violence;
- 1 out of 10 adults believe that the use of violent discipline is necessary to educate a child.

We also see increasing numbers of **children on the move** due to inequality, political crisis, natural disasters, climate change and the prevalence of armed violence in communities and societies. Children who are separated or unaccompanied are particularly vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse at every stage of their journey: at their point of origin, during their journey and at their destination.

**Armed violence in the** community is often linked to drug trafficking, the availability and accessibility to small arms and high rates of inequality and exclusion combined with appalling rates of corruption. Last week, my Office joined a regional seminar on small arms in schools in Latin America and the Caribbean organized by UNLIREC. One key conclusion from this event was the need to integrate a child rights approach into discussions related to small arms.

Of increasing concern is **children's safety when they are online**. Children can be exposed to harmful information or abusive material, groomed by potential predators, and subjected to exploitation and abuse, including through the production and distribution of child abuse images or live web streaming.

We know that **children deprived of liberty** have an increased risk of violence. Even though international standards are clear that juvenile offenders should be dealt with, without resorting to judicial proceedings to greatest degree as possible, there are still too many juvenile justice systems that resort to deprivation of liberty as the main response to juvenile offenders. Moreover, a large proportion of children is detained for minor offenses and are first-time offenders who should not, according to international standards, be placed in justice institutions to start with.

In our recent **Report on Children speak about the impact of deprivation of liberty: the case of Latin America**, children identified the linkages between the cycle of violence and the cycle of deprivation of liberty in context of poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Violence at home, poverty, structural violence and risky survival activities, propel children into the juvenile justice system.

In fact, detention in the justice system is often used as a substitute for referral to child care and protection services.

There is a worrying trend for children to be placed in institutions, rather than minimizing the risk of violence against children by ensuring effective prevention.

In the report children describe how physical, mental and sexual violence are prevalent to a degree that violence has been normalized as a way of survival.

Violence amongst peers and between adults and children is accepted and tolerated as a form of discipline, as a form of self-defense and as form of survival. Children live with a sense of being defenseless and become indifferent to violence. In some cases, conditions are so deplorable that it can only be characterized as a process of dehumanization for children.

**Violence leaves long-lasting scars on children's lives.** It often has irreversible consequences on their development and well-being and limits their opportunities to thrive later in life.

It also weakens the very foundation of social progress, generating huge costs for society, according to some estimates up to **7 trillion USD**<sup>1</sup> per year, slowing economic development and eroding States' human and social capital.

**Our key question must be:** if the costs of inaction on violence against children, are so high and the solutions are known, why does it continue? What must we do to move better, faster and further in bringing it to an end?

To move better, faster and further in bringing it to an end, **it is crucial** that specific child rights obligations in these areas are respected and fulfilled by all States in their national planning and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

**This calls for adequate** financing and investment in children, clear political leadership on the area of children's rights, strengthening national child protection systems, prioritizing those in situations of greatest vulnerability and marginalization; and a human rights approach to data and monitoring, including through transparency and quality disaggregated data to reflect the situation of all children, particularly those who are too often uncared, yet also at greatest risk of being left behind.

**This calls also for** wide participation throughout the implementation and follow-up and review processes, with effective measures to bring about accountability.

It requires promoting the **meaningful participation of children** in decisions that greatly affect them, engaging children and incorporating their opinions and voices in policies and actions in their own communities.

Listening to children's voices and treating children as active participants with full rights and being accountable to children will be crucial if we are to make real progress in creating a world for children that is free from violence.

I urge you to ensure you create the **appropriate mechanisms to ensure that children and young people actively participate in the implementation process of the SDGs in every country.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.odi.org/projects/2778-costs-inaction-against-child-violence>

Still few countries in this region have taken action to inform **their VNRS or to include children's voices in SDGs related actions.**

Next year, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Panama, Peru, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago<sup>2</sup> will present their VNRs and have the opportunity to make visible the interlinkages of violence against children with the other SDGs and to inform their VNRs with the voices of children and young people.

**30 years after adoption of the CRC, 10 years after the establishment of the mandate on VAC and 4 years after adoption of SDGs and yet still more needs to be done, better and faster, to protect children worldwide from all forms of violence ensure that no child is behind, and to put children at the heart of the 2030 agenda.**

**The 30th anniversary of the CRC is an historic occasion and cannot simply be a symbolic celebration. There is no better time to strengthen the momentum and to act, not only on behalf of those who are children today, but for the 1 billion individuals who will be born between now and 2030: the children who will inherit a post-SDG world.**

Working closely together we can create a global repository of best practices, learn from each other and help ensure that we achieve the goal of eliminating violence against children by 2030.

After all, the best way to ensure that no child is left behind is to put them first!

**To end violence against children by 2030 and to ensure NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND, we must ACT Now!**

I would to conclude with 2 sentences from the 2006 Global study on VAC:

**“No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable.**

**Every society, no matter its cultural, economic or social background, can and must stop violence against children”.**

I look forward to actively collaborating with all of you and learning more about the progress and challenges in ending violence against children in the Americas.

Thank you.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates> web site accessed on Oct 25.