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Children and Armed Conflict and
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Eurochild welcomes the update of the EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, aimed to enhance the EU's ability to protect the rights of children affected by armed conflict and focused on prevention, accountability, cooperation and holistic child-centered interventions. We urge the EU to apply the Guidelines alongside diplomatic and economic tools to uphold the rights of children affected by all conflicts while putting all efforts into preventing them.

Children and armed conflict

Children are disproportionately affected by armed conflicts. The UN Secretary General's latest [annual report on children and armed conflict](#) highlights a 21% increase in grave violations against children in conflict situations in 2023. Last year, the number of instances of killing and maiming increased by a staggering 35% in Palestine, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Ukraine, among many other situations. According to the report, the United Nations verified that a total of 1,861 children were recruited, 281 children were subjected to sexual violence and 870 children were abducted. In Sudan, the United Nations confirmed the recruitment of 209 children, along with the deaths of 480 children and the maiming of 764. Sexual violence was reported against 114 girls.

Regarding the situation in Palestine, on 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the current conduct of Israel in Gaza constituted [a risk of genocide](#) and ordered Israel to take measures to prevent it. Additionally, the [UN Agency for Palestinian Refugees](#) (UNRWA) described the war on Gaza as "a war on children" reporting that more children have been killed there in recent months than in four years of conflict worldwide. Since 7 October 2023, [85% of educational facilities in Gaza](#) have been hit or damaged. Israeli forces are bombing hospitals, and 'safe zones' and have [severely impeded the humanitarian response](#) to the catastrophe faced by Gazans, leaving the Strip's population on the verge of famine, with hardly any clean water or medicine, with detrimental consequences for children. [In his report](#), published earlier this month, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food also provided an account of how Israel is using starvation as a tactic in the conflict against the Palestinian people in Gaza.

The updated Guidelines

The [Guidelines](#) highlight that children in conflict zones endure severe violations, including death, injury, recruitment by armed groups, and sexual violence. **Wars could lead to**

disabilities, malnutrition, lack of shelter, education, healthcare, and psychological trauma, perpetuating cycles of violence and poverty across generations. Emerging challenges include climate change, school targeting, child trafficking, and the use of new technologies and explosive weapons. Efforts to protect children are hampered by modern conflict complexities, data gaps, resource limitations, and weak legal frameworks, resulting in a lack of accountability and ongoing impunity.

Key principles of the Guidelines

The Guidelines are embedded in key principles:

- Children are recognised as **rights holders**, not just as victims, but also as survivors and active participants in their own lives. Their rights to survival and development should be upheld.
- The principle of **non-discrimination** is crucial to ensuring that all children, including children with disabilities and deprived of parental care, receive specific protection. Interventions should be tailored to **address each child's unique situation**, focusing on holistic and sustainable solutions and always considering the best interests of the child. **Children associated with armed forces or groups** are regarded primarily as victims under international human rights and humanitarian law.
- The approach is **child- and victim-centred**, involving them in identifying needs and priorities. The EU also recognises the profound psychological impacts of conflict on children and aims to address these through **age- and gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches**.
- **Accountability and justice**, ensuring that crimes against children are monitored, investigated, and prosecuted, with perpetrators held accountable, is supported. **Child safeguarding and conflict-sensitive approaches** are central, alongside the participation and empowerment of children and youth, always applying the principle of "**Do no harm.**"

Opportunities for effective EU action

According to the Guidelines, the EU will build stronger partnerships to enhance the actions below:

- Greater investment in **preventing** armed conflicts and child rights violations, **in particular, the six grave violations against children, as defined by the UN**, are needed. The EU aims to **coordinate humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts** to address immediate and long-term needs in crises.
- The EU should support age- and gender-responsive, disability-inclusive, community-based integrated **social and child protection systems in fragile countries**.
- **Child protection considerations should be integrated** into disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes, security sector reforms, and justice initiatives to ensure child-friendly access to justice.
- The EU should **foster closer collaboration** with UN entities and agencies, national and local authorities and civil society, focusing on child protection.

- **Training and capacity building for child protection** actors are essential, as is supporting local, child-led, and community-driven initiatives for peace and protection. Ensuring children's active participation in decision-making is also a priority.

Looking ahead

With these updated Guidelines, the EU commits to creating a safer and more supportive environment for children in conflict zones. The Guidelines were updated at the same time as the [Checklist](#) for the Integration of Protection of Children Affected by Armed Conflict into the Common Security and Defence Policy Missions and Operations, an operational tool guiding the planning and conduct of operational activities for crisis management missions.

The Guidelines rightfully highlight the responsibility the EU wants to take on to ensure children's rights are respected and upheld in times of armed conflict. **Eurochild consistently raises awareness of the situation of children in armed conflicts**, including by advocating for [a ceasefire and famine prevention](#) in Gaza and [urging Israel to respect international law](#). **We call on the EU member States to** use their leverage and employ all lawful means at their disposal to influence Israel to refrain from acts in breach of the Genocide Convention, as concluded by the ICJ, including the review or suspension of trade negotiations and agreements.

Children's rights violations at the hands of Israel extend to children in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Lebanon. Despite this, European countries continue to export weapons to Israel, and their public funds are used to support the arms manufacturers producing these weapons. **Immediate and decisive measures by the EU institutions and the Member States are not just necessary—they are overdue.** What is happening is the consequence of the international community's political and moral failure, including the EU. **The time for a response is now; delay is unacceptable.**

In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Eurochild highlights the [violations of children's rights](#), [the challenges in upholding them](#), and the [efforts towards Ukraine's reconstruction](#). Since the start of the war, Eurochild has joined other civil society organisations in offering recommendations to the EU on how to support children's rights, including through the [Temporary Protection Directive](#) and the Ukraine Facility and Plan. We also provided targeted recommendations on how to [strengthen the child care and protection systems in Ukraine](#).

As H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, Eurochild's President, stated at the [Eurochild 2024 Convention](#), "Ensuring peace is essential to protect children's rights. Wars deprive children of their rights. Peace is more than the absence of war; it is the presence of justice and equality. Peace is the foundational stone upon which we can build just societies."

As the biggest humanitarian donor in the world, the EU has the moral obligation to protect children affected by conflicts while putting all efforts into preventing them. We urge the EU to implement these Guidelines with tools and diplomatic efforts, including

sanctions, humanitarian assistance, upholding law and accountability, human rights monitoring, political dialogues, and collaboration with regional and international partners. By leveraging these Guidelines alongside diplomatic and political initiatives, we call on the EU to prevent and protect children from the impacts of armed conflicts, ensuring the promotion and protection of children's rights in these challenging contexts.

Guaranteeing these rights is fundamental to fostering a peaceful environment for children and is a precondition for children to live in dignity, respect and full enjoyment of their rights.

For more information, contact:

Francesca Pisanu

EU Advocacy Officer

Francesca.pisanu@eurochild.org

Eurochild AISBL

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Brussels

Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83

info@eurochild.org – www.eurochild.org

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