



Taking Action to Protect Children in Escalating Conflict and Crises: **Armed Violence, Climate Shocks, and Displacement**



BACKGROUND PAPER FOR THE 2024 ANNUAL MEETING
FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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This Background Papers aims to support the upcoming discussions during the 2024 Annual Meeting for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. Based upon over 300 responses to the Annual Meeting Theme Survey, this year's theme focuses on protecting children in escalating conflict and crises.

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1. The Impact on Children of Escalating Conflict and Crises Around the World

In recent years, there has been a troubling rise in the number and severity of humanitarian crises, leading to more children experiencing different forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation. There has been a 40% increase in conflict from 2020 to 2023.¹ The past two years have seen the most conflicts ever since the end of the Second World War,² and the percentage of children living in conflict zones worldwide has nearly tripled, rising from less than 5% in 1990 to over 14% in 2019.³ In 2023, a record 400 million children (one in six) lived in conflict settings and faced severe violations such as killing, maiming, and sexual violence, amongst others.⁴ Climate change has become the biggest driver of the increase in humanitarian crises, with extreme weather events now eight times more frequent than 20 years ago.⁵ In 2023, the number of forcibly displaced people globally reached a record high of over 114 million people,⁶ including 43.3 million children (or 40%) due to violence, climate-induced disasters, or both.⁷

During economic crises, armed conflict, and in forced displacement settings, risk factors of harm are heightened, while protective factors in a child's ecosystem are weakened or eroded, leading to increased vulnerability and risk of harm. This is often combined with a lack of or limited availability of protection services. Many times, the threats to children's safety stem from a combination of factors, such as armed violence, political unrest, economic downturns, and both natural and human-caused disasters. The cumulative effects of the climate crisis are exacerbating pre-existing crises.⁸

Stretched thin and facing reduced funding from donors, in part because of the global economic downturn, the humanitarian system is struggling to meet the growing need for child protection in crisis situations. In 2022, around 22.4 million children and their caregivers in humanitarian settings were targeted for child protection services requiring funding of nearly \$795 million. However, governments only funded 19% of the needs, leaving nearly 18 million boys, girls and caregivers without protection and assistance.⁹ Funding shortfalls in 2023 and the beginning of 2024 leave populations in need vulnerable worldwide.¹⁰ Despite a slight increase in funding for protection in 2023, 86% of Protection Cluster operations were less than 50% funded.¹¹ Besides this, the current humanitarian framework, including for child protection in humanitarian action,¹² was originally established in the middle of the 20th century to address short-term humanitarian crises and emergencies.¹³ While in the past few decades, conflicts, displacement, and natural disasters have become protracted, long-term challenges¹⁴ for which the existing system is not fully equipped.

Over the past few years, the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region has seen a rise in humanitarian contexts. New child protection challenges, including increased violence from criminal groups and gangs, are compounded by deep-seated socio-economic and gender inequality, and governments' limited ability to tackle these structural issues effectively and sustainably. Record numbers of children are moving across the Americas. In 2022, there were 21.5 million forcibly displaced and stateless people across The Americas,¹⁵ a 66% rise since 2019.¹⁶ In 2023, 520,085 people on the move heading towards the US-Mexico border¹⁷ traversed the Darien Gap, which represents a **400% increase** from 2021,¹⁸ including an increasing number of unaccompanied and separated children.¹⁹ Since 2014, 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled the country, including 3.8 million children,²⁰ with a 77.5% increase since 2019, becoming the largest displacement crisis worldwide.²¹ The region has also struggled to rebound from the economic downturn caused by COVID-19.²² The UN's Global Humanitarian Overviews of 2022 and 2023 underscored the need to reassess international aid in the region, given the significant worsening of economic crises, increasing climate change impacts (particularly in rural areas), and rising violence increasing protection risks for children and women, especially those from Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities.^{23,24}

2. Worsening Armed Violence and Conflict²⁵

There's been a 40% increase in conflict from 2020 to 2023.²⁶ The past two years have seen the most conflicts ever since the end of the Second World War,²⁷ and the percentage of children living in conflict zones worldwide has nearly tripled from less than 5% in 1990 to over 14% in 2019.²⁸ Approximately 400 million children (one in every six) live in conflict-stricken areas, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine, Israel and the State of Palestine, and Yemen.²⁹ In its last 2023 report³⁰ covering January–December 2022, the UN Secretary-General highlights 27,180 verified grave violations against children, the highest-ever number reported. The toll on children is alarming, with increased recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, killing and maiming, along with abductions and sexual violence.³¹

ESCALATING VIOLENCE IN THE GAZA STRIP AND THE WEST BANK

The current war in Gaza is the deadliest conflict for children in recent times. In the first month alone, 10 times more children were killed in Gaza than in the entire first year of the war in Ukraine.³² Children and their families have nowhere safe to go as Israel continues to bomb previously declared safe areas. Children are being maimed and suffering physical injuries, with little option for medical care or treatment. More than 10 children a day lose a limb with lifelong consequences for their physical and mental health.³³ All children in Gaza are highly food insecure and at risk of famine.³⁴ Three months of constant bombardment and restrictions on aid entering Gaza have created the conditions for an exponential rise in malnutrition, with extremely limited access to food and water. The suspension of funding in January 2024 by the main donor countries to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which is the primary source of aid for millions of Palestinians in Gaza and surrounding areas, poses a significant risk to the lives of Palestinians in these regions.³⁵



The security situation has dramatically deteriorated in the central Sahel states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (all of which are currently ruled by military juntas), with civilian deaths rising by over 18% in 2023.³⁶ 16.8 million people, including 10 million children,³⁷ are in need of humanitarian assistance across the three countries.³⁸ Children have died from gunshots, explosives, or during village attacks; hundreds, especially girls, have been abducted.³⁹ By 2024, almost 6 million Ukrainians have sought refuge abroad, including 1.9 million children, and 3.7 million people remain internally displaced.⁴⁰ The Ukrainian government has reported that more than 19,500 children have been abducted by Russia since the war began.⁴¹ 6.5 million Syrians have been forced to flee their country since 2011.⁴² A generation of young Syrians is considered at risk of developmental and health issues due to their exposure to trauma and toxic stress.⁴³

Growing up in increasingly violent environments is affecting children’s well-being and mental and physical health.⁴⁴ High levels of exposure to violence can lead to disability, developmental delay, malnutrition, post-traumatic stress, and emotional and behavioural disorders in the long term.⁴⁵ Essential services and infrastructure that children depend on to survive and thrive, including hospitals and schools, are being attacked or used for military purposes, and lifesaving humanitarian assistance is being deliberately denied. Children in armed conflicts are also exposed to sexual violence.⁴⁶ This is while across many countries, traditional societal norms, practices and behaviours about masculinity and sex (e.g., victim-blaming, anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes, rigid patriarchal systems), and lack of specialised services,⁴⁷ discourage child survivors from reporting their aggressors and seeking help.⁴⁸

The number of children recruited and used by armed forces and armed groups is also rising. Since 2018, the UN Security Council has consistently reported that recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups is one of the top two most commonly reported and verified cases, with 2022 seeing a 20% increase in verified cases in comparison to 2021.⁴⁹ Beyond coercion, many children are pushed to join armed forces and armed groups as a survival mechanism,⁵⁰ especially in areas characterised by structural inequity, lack of educational or livelihood opportunities, and the absence of basic services like healthcare.⁵¹



Deteriorating Security Conditions in LAC

Rising violence by gangs, criminal organisations, and armed groups poses increasing risks for children and compounds already high levels of violence against children. The LAC region has the highest homicide rate for those under 18 years of age worldwide (four times higher than the global average),⁵² and homicide has been the leading cause of death for boys and a major cause for girls in the Americas between 2000 and 2019.⁵³ In many contexts across the region, historically marginalised groups such as rural Indigenous⁵⁴ and Afro-descendant communities,⁵⁵ or children living in neighbourhoods where

armed violence and poverty are prevalent⁵⁶ disproportionately suffer from higher levels of violence.⁵⁷ The main drivers for high levels of violence in the region are the severe socioeconomic inequalities, which rank among the highest globally,⁵⁸ high levels of labour informality and precarity,⁵⁹ the dominant patriarchal culture, organised crime, gang violence, urban marginalisation, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and 'mano dura' (iron fist) security policies.⁶⁰ The past few years have seen rising homicide rates connected to tensions between criminal groups involved in trafficking in persons or drug trafficking in several South American countries previously considered safe, such as Ecuador,⁶¹ (where homicidal violence rose by roughly 407% between 2016 and 2022),⁶² some parts of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile,⁶³ and in some small Caribbean nations.⁶⁴ In Haiti, the number of homicides increased by 62% and kidnappings by 178% between 2019 and 2022 as heavily armed gangs and organised criminal organisations expanded their control over large swathes of the country.⁶⁵

VIOLENCE BY ARMED FORCES IN COLOMBIA

In 2023, Colombia was ranked as one of the most neglected displacement crises worldwide due to the continuation of the 60-year-old armed conflict, the ongoing Venezuelan refugee and migrant crisis, and the impact of climate change and extreme weather events.⁶⁶ Since the 2016 Peace Accord, the fragmentation of large armed groups has led to the emergence of many local factions fighting for control over illegal businesses and trafficking channels.⁶⁷ Colombia's most isolated and unprotected citizens, including rural women and children belonging to Afro-Colombian, Black, Raizal, Palenquera and Indigenous communities, are among the primary victims.⁶⁸ Children are compelled to join armed groups due to the absence of educational opportunities, economic necessity, or to flee from violence in their homes.⁶⁹ A Colombian practitioner explains, *"children living in rural areas, sometimes seven or eight hours away from the urban centres, are very vulnerable to forced recruitment [...] In many cases, non-state armed forces promise to give children a better material life and the opportunity to work. Many children join them as a survival mechanism. Children who have been recruited and used by armed forces have suffered from physical violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and labour exploitation in illegal activities."*⁷⁰





3. Rising Climate-Induced Crises and Associated Child Protection Risks

Climate-related disasters are rising sharply.⁷¹ Climate change has become the biggest driver of the increase in humanitarian crises, with extreme weather events now eight times more frequent than 20 years ago.⁷² Around 1 billion children are at high risk of being affected by the climate crisis. Of these, 820 million (over one-third of the world's children) are highly exposed to heatwaves, 400 million (nearly 1 in 6) to cyclones, 330 million (1 in 7) to river flooding, 240 million (1 in 10) to coastal flooding, and 920 million (over one third) to a lack of water.⁷³

The increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events that disrupt livelihoods amplify the risk of violence against children⁷⁴ because they compound existing vulnerabilities for children, families, and communities already experiencing adversities.⁷⁵ The climate crisis strains local systems, increases stress on families and communities, and has led to public health emergencies, heightened risks of armed conflict, forced displacement, and disruptions in critical health and social services.⁷⁶ Climate change also leads to the escalation of tensions between pastoralists and farmers, which are exploited by armed groups and traffickers.⁷⁷

Economic vulnerability stemming from lack of livelihood opportunities and food insecurity is correlated with higher levels of trafficking, child labour, neglect, psychosocial distress, physical and emotional maltreatment, child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and family separation.⁷⁸ For example, at the start of 2024, thirteen of the twenty-six countries with humanitarian response plans are categorised as facing the highest risk from the effects of climate change.⁷⁹ Among these, ten countries also have the highest adolescent birth rates, ranking within the top twenty globally; twelve are among the twenty countries with the most severe rates of child marriage; and five are listed among the top twenty for the highest rates of intimate partner violence.^{80,81} In the Horn of Africa, drought and food insecurity affecting 49 million people⁸² has driven school drop-outs and increased child marriage; with estimates suggesting child marriage has doubled, and FGM has risen by 27% in hardest-hit areas of Ethiopia.⁸³

Climate-Induced Child Displacement in the LAC region

It is estimated that 32.6 million people worldwide were internally displaced by climate change, and natural and man-made disasters in 2023, a 45% increase since 2021.⁸⁴ This includes 1.4 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, doubling since 2013.⁸⁵ Children displaced due to climate change and disasters face the risk of losing ties to social networks and family and struggle to access education, healthcare, and social services, which diminishes their resilience to deal with climate change effects.⁸⁶ In the Caribbean, climate change and natural and man-made disasters have displaced over 6.6 million people from 2008 to 2017.⁸⁷ Increasing extreme weather events, alongside rising sea levels and droughts, are increasingly impacting food insecurity,⁸⁸ a driver of child protection concerns.⁸⁹

CHILD DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION FROM GUATEMALA'S HIGHLANDS

Guatemala ranks as one of the most vulnerable countries to the climate crisis in Latin America. Its acute susceptibility increases the impact of food insecurity and decreased water resources, especially due to its location in the **Dry Corridor of Central America**.⁹⁰ The situation has led to an increased food security crisis, especially in the western regions.⁹¹ Internal displacement to large cities and mass migration to the U.S. from underserved rural, majority Indigenous areas is a common survival mechanism that disrupts the family structure and identity of communities.⁹² Over 55% of the children who are returned to their home communities after having migrated are Indigenous, predominantly Mam and K'iche' children from the western regions, and have experienced violence and significant racism during their journey to the United States.⁹³ Girls on the move in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador of Central America and Mexico towards the United States are particularly exposed to sexual violence and risk being trafficked or becoming victims of extortion.⁹⁴





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4. Escalating Forced Displacement Crises

As more and more people are forced to flee escalating conflict, violence and climate-induced disasters, the number of forcibly displaced people globally reached a record high in 2023 of over 114 million people,⁹⁵ including 43.3 million children (or 40%).⁹⁶ Children can become displaced by armed conflict and violence,⁹⁷ sudden-onset climate events or disasters, or by the consequences of their intersections. Due to the protracted nature of most current conflicts, the majority of these displaced children will spend their whole lives in displacement, facing disrupted access to education, health care, social protection, and other essential services.⁹⁸ Children affected by forced displacement and statelessness face heightened risks of violence, neglect, abuse, and exploitation.⁹⁹

An increasing number of children in 2023 were unaccompanied or separated from their families or caregivers. More than 11,600 children crossed the Central Mediterranean Sea to Italy without their parents or legal guardians between January and mid-September 2023, an increase of 60% compared to the previous year.¹⁰⁰ Without the care of families or other caregivers, unaccompanied and separated children are at heightened risk of physical and psychological harm, abduction, trafficking and recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups, sexual abuse and exploitation,¹⁰¹ health concerns, and violent treatment by officials.¹⁰² In Sudan, where the world's largest child displacement crisis has unfolded since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023,¹⁰³ the blocking of humanitarian access in conflict areas has made it harder to provide them with essential services, such as food and medicine.¹⁰⁴

Increasingly Perilous Journeys for Children in the LAC Region

At the end of 2022, there were 21.5 million forcibly displaced and stateless people across the Americas, a 38% rise from 15.6 million in 2019.¹⁰⁵ In 2023, 520,085 people on the move heading towards the US-Mexico border¹⁰⁶ traversed the Darien Gap (a dangerous and isolated 100-mile-long by 30-mile-wide jungle area located between Colombia and Panama), which represents a 400% increase from 2021.¹⁰⁷ Among them, there were 120,000 children,¹⁰⁸ including an increasing number of unaccompanied and separated children.¹⁰⁹ A combination of factors such as the deteriorating economic conditions, including as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of climate change

and natural and man-made disasters, food insecurity, political instability, increased violence already noted, have collectively contributed to the rise in migration and displacement across borders in the region.¹¹⁰

Approximately 25% of all people on the move across the Americas are children, a rise from 19% in 2019.¹¹¹ There is a reported trend of younger children being part of those transiting north towards the U.S.¹¹² Additionally in 2022 50% of children crossing the Darien Gap were below the age of five,¹¹³ while over 500 pregnant women reportedly crossed the Darien jungle in 2023.¹¹⁴ The number of children from northern Central American countries and Mexico arriving at the US Southwest land border remained high in recent years.¹¹⁵

INCREASING HUMANITARIAN AND CHILD PROTECTION NEEDS FOR VENEZUELAN

Rampant inflation, food insecurity, and shortages of public services and affordable medicine have led to 19 million in need of humanitarian assistance within Venezuela by the end of 2023, including 3.8 million children.¹¹⁶ Since 2014, 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled the country,¹¹⁷ with a 77.5% increase since 2019, becoming the largest displacement crisis worldwide.¹¹⁸ Of the 6.5 million Venezuelans who have found refuge in other LAC countries, 4.42 million are in need of humanitarian assistance.¹¹⁹ Rising inflation, COVID-19 impacts, and high unemployment have made it challenging for them to integrate into host societies within the region,¹²⁰ pushing them to engage in secondary movements toward the US.¹²¹ Venezuelan children in Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador (three of the primary countries hosting them) have been found to be exposed to human trafficking for sexual or labour exploitation, sexual violence, family separation, illegal adoptions, forced recruitment by armed forces or criminal gangs, and becoming victims of extortion, threats, intimidation, and persecution both in transit and in destination countries.¹²²

The LAC region contains some of the world's deadliest migration and displacement routes, including the Mexico-U.S. border, which is the most lethal land crossing globally, irregular paths to and through the Caribbean Sea, and the Darien Gap.¹²³ In recent years, regional migration management policies that focus too narrowly on deterrence and rely heavily on border security efforts¹²⁴ have led to the proliferation of unofficial migration routes.¹²⁵ The increased use of unofficial border crossings and informal routes has rendered people more vulnerable to kidnappings, gender-based violence,¹²⁶ smuggling, and trafficking.¹²⁷ Children and their caregivers who belong to historically marginalised communities, such as LGBTQI+ individuals,¹²⁸ Black and Afro-Latin American peoples or Indigenous communities,¹²⁹ and people with disabilities¹³⁰ are at a heightened risk of violence. During the demanding journey to cross the Darien Gap, children and their families are exposed to risks connected to the extreme weather and ecosystem, sexual violence,¹³¹ extortion, and trafficking perpetrated by criminal groups.¹³² There are many reports of children dying during the trek.¹³³

5. Questions to Prepare for the 2024 Annual Meeting for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action

Against this background, the 2024 Annual Meeting for CPHA will be an opportunity for participants to share experiences, exchange lessons learned, and discuss approaches and strategies, to protect children amidst the troubling rise in the number and complexity of crises, from diverse global and regional perspectives. This section of the paper provides a set of questions for participants to consider as they prepare for, participate in, and take action following the meeting.

What changes are child protection practitioners seeing in how children are affected by escalating conflict and crises?

- What changes are child protection practitioners seeing in how children are affected?
- How are local and national child protection stakeholders enhancing existing CP systems to address new crises?
- How are organisations deciding which essential services to prioritise, considering rising needs and reduced funding?
- How can organisations protect children when access to affected communities is reduced?

What can we do across programming, policy, and advocacy to protect children in escalating crises?

- In what ways can localised and contextualised social service workforce strengthening and wider facilitation of local actors help?
- How can strengthened child accountability mechanisms, including child participation, help?
- What methods can be employed to strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration?
- How can advocacy efforts be strengthened to prioritise children’s protection in humanitarian action, including emergency preparedness, prevention, and service delivery?

What can we do across programming, policy, and advocacy to protect children in escalating crises?

- How can working across the “nexus” help? Is this being invested in / working in your context?
- How are our approaches to protecting children needing to change as a result of decreased humanitarian access and limited funding?

6. Endnotes

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