



2026

POLICY BRIEF

Advancing Children's Roles in Peace Processes
and the Vancouver Principles

Key Recommendations for Mediators and Policymakers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An estimated 520 million children live in areas affected by armed conflict¹, yet children remain consistently underrepresented in peace processes. This gap is evident in efforts to address the recruitment and use of boys and girls: research shows that of 252 peace agreements between 1990-2022 that mention children, only 77 agreements across 32 peace processes explicitly address this issue². These gaps persist despite the well-documented effects that armed conflict has on both boys and girls and the growing recognition of their roles as agents of peace. Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond normative commitments toward clearer operational guidance, stronger political buy-in, and the consistent adoption and contextualization of existing practical tools that enable mediators and policymakers to integrate child protection provisions and the perspectives of diverse children into peace processes. Doing so is essential not only to protect children from grave violations like recruitment and use but also to recognize and uphold children's agency and autonomy.

In November 2025, The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace, and Security convened senior mediators, policymakers from the United Nations and African Union, international non-governmental organizations, representatives from civil society and academia, security sector and defense actors and children (two boys and two girls) and youth (three young women and two young men). The conference directly engaged mediators and policymakers to increase political buy-in for the inclusion of child protection provisions and children's perspectives in peace processes, while strengthening their ability to meaningfully and safely engage with children and operationalize Vancouver Principle 14. It also provided a platform to share practical experiences and lessons learned across sub-Saharan Africa, highlight the value of children's and youth voices, and explore how diverse stakeholders can advance children's roles and child protection provisions in peace processes.

This policy brief outlines key findings from the conference, including insights put forward by children and youth themselves, as well as practical recommendations for policymakers and mediators to strengthen the integration of child protection provisions and children's perspectives across all phases of peace processes.

¹ Save the Children. *Stop the War on Children: Security for Whom? 2025*

² Molloy, S. (2023). *Child soldiers and peace agreements. PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.*

KEY FINDINGS

“Child inclusion is a process. It requires patience, listening, and creating safe spaces where children feel comfortable to express themselves. Adults should support children rather than speak for them.”

Meshack (boy, aged 14)

- ▶ Inclusion is not achieved simply by having children present at the negotiating table. It requires intentionality and the creation of safe, accessible, child-friendly spaces where girls and boys (especially those facing intersecting forms of marginalization) are supported to meaningfully participate. Decision-makers must not only hear children, but actively value and act upon their perspectives. Children and youth should be recognized as rights-holders and trusted partners in peace processes, not symbolic or token representatives.
- ▶ Because of age-related bias, children are often tokenized, while youth are more frequently politicized as “troublemakers” and excluded from peace processes. These distinct forms of marginalization require different safeguarding thresholds to address the specific risks faced by children and youth.
- ▶ Children are not a homogeneous group, yet peace processes frequently treat them as a single category or engage them only narrowly through a protection lens. The experiences of boys and girls and their priorities for peace vary significantly based on age, disability, displacement status, socio-economic background, and direct exposure to violence, including recruitment and use.
- ▶ While the African Union has established mediation guidelines³, these do not yet adequately or systematically address the distinct rights, risks, and participation needs of children, including girls, boys, and marginalized groups of children. In particular, limited attention is given to gendered and intersectional impacts of conflict on children, including how age, disability, displacement, and social exclusion shape children’s experiences and access to protection and voice.

³African Union. (2014). *AU Mediation Support Handbook*. African Union Peace and Security Department.

KEY FINDINGS

(continued)

- While the United Nations has developed practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict⁴, its application remains inconsistent by those leading and supporting peace processes. Addressing this gap requires sustained engagement, stronger political will, a greater investment in the training and contextual adaptation of these tools, and the systematic inclusion of children’s perspectives. These efforts must be accompanied by the strengthening of normative frameworks such as the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, to ensure that peace processes address the realities, rights, and needs of children affected by conflict.
- There is no clear operational guidance on the timing and entry points of bringing children’s perspectives and their voices into peace processes, including before, during, and after negotiation phases.
- While Member States may commit to including child protection provisions in peace agreements, responsibility for ensuring follow-through is often unclear. Weak monitoring frameworks, inadequate security sector reform, insufficient resourcing, limited inclusion of youth and children who have been formerly recruited and used by armed forces or armed groups, and weak accountability mechanisms mean that commitments to inclusion frequently erode once agreements are signed, raising the question of who holds Member States to account when these obligations are not met.

“Peace is not inherited; it is co-created. By investing in young people’s participation today, we are investing in a future built on empathy, equality, and shared responsibility. By trusting children and youth as active peacebuilders, we ensure that the agreements we make today endure for generations to come.”

The Dallaire Institute Youth Advisory Council’s
Collective Statement

⁴Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. (2020). *Practical guidance for mediators to protect children in situations of armed conflict*. United Nations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GROUND PARTICIPATION IN CLEAR PRINCIPLES AND STANDARDS

- Establish minimum standards for gender-sensitive child participation in peace processes, emphasizing confidentiality, psychological safety, respect and developmentally appropriate participation.
- Define age cohorts for youth and children globally to avoid conflation, respond to distinct risks faced by youth and children, and prevent disregard for children's voices. There should be separate youth and children participation tracks, with intentional bridges between them.
- Ensure mediators and policymakers meaningfully centre the lived experiences, priorities, and agency of girls and boys in peace processes by valuing local knowledge and child-led leadership, actively addressing gendered and intersectional power dynamics, and creating safe, accessible mechanisms for participation. Particular attention should be given to the voices of marginalized children - including refugee and internally displaced children, children with disabilities, and other excluded groups - to ensure their perspectives safely and meaningfully inform key decisions.

“If children can be part of the war, they can be part of the peace.”

Dr. Juan-Diaz Prinz
Senior Advisor, Berghof Foundation

DESIGN PARTICIPATION AS PROTECTION, INFORMED BY RISK AND CONTEXT

- Conduct risk and needs assessments before designing interventions, recognizing that meaningful participation, when done safely, can be a form of protection.
- Move toward formal, structured, and sustained participation of children at every stage in peace processes, rather than ad hoc or symbolic engagement.
- Develop clear guidance on timing and entry points for bringing children's perspectives into mediation and peace processes.

“Excluding children from peace processes makes the process incomplete. Children are not just victims; they are also actors of peace.”

Juliet (girl, aged 17)

RECOMMENDATIONS

EXPAND SAFE AND CREATIVE PATHWAYS TO ACCESS AND AMPLIFY CHILDREN'S VOICES

- Develop safe, ethical, and creative methods to include children's perspectives in ways that extend beyond sitting at the negotiating table, such as consulting schools and community groups; leveraging social media to help children speak directly to mediators and decision makers; engaging trusted intermediaries (e.g., teachers, psychologists, community leaders); and forming coalitions to amplify children's voices.
- Ensure all participation spaces are gender-sensitive, psychologically safe, inclusive, confidential, voluntary, supportive and appropriate to children's ages, developmental stages and individual experiences.

STRENGTHEN TOOLS, GUIDANCE, AND THE CAPACITY OF MEDIATORS AND POLICYMAKERS

- Develop and deliver training for mediators on child protection frameworks, including the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, trauma-informed mediation, use of child-friendly materials, and the application of child safeguarding principles throughout design, implementation, and policy processes.
- Identify practical methods for implementing existing tools, including making them more accessible, designing innovative formats, and emphasizing local interventions based on culture and context.
- Consider safe, ethical, and practical uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in mediation, with safeguards to protect children's data, privacy, and well-being.

“When children are given a platform, they can contribute meaningfully to peace processes. We should not underestimate children just because of their age.”

Abigail (girl, aged 12)

IMPROVE COORDINATION AND LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

- Map existing mediation structures within communities to identify entry points for child-sensitive and child-inclusive approaches.
- Strengthen collaboration between mediators and other stakeholders including security sector and defense actors, country task forces, UN agencies, government actors and local leaders.
- Engage and leverage local networks (e.g., community leaders, youth-led groups and initiatives) to support implementation and sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

STRENGTHEN ACCOUNTABILITY, LEARNING, AND RESOURCING

- Use concrete language in child-centered commitments and child protection provisions, avoiding wording that is ambiguous or aspirational.
- Strengthen approaches to evaluating the impact of child-inclusive or child-centered mediation, including both protection outcomes and influence on peace processes.
- Encourage donors to invest in child-centered peace processes, including considering children's meaningful inclusion as a condition for funding.
- Identify high-profile champions and build coalitions of allies to prioritize children's participation and child protection provisions as highly visible requirements in mediation and peace processes.

“When there is war, everyone is affected and if children can be part of war, so why can't they be part of the peacebuilding process?”

Leshan (boy, aged 13)

KEY RESOURCES

1. [Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers Implementation Guidance](#), see Vancouver Principle 14 on Peace Processes
2. [African Union Mediation Support Handbook](#), African Union and ACCORD
3. [Practical Guidance for Mediators to Protect Children in Situations of Armed Conflict](#), Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict
4. [Sean Molloy \(2023\) “Child Soldiers and Peace Agreements” Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform](#)
5. [Stop the War on Children: Security for Whom? \(2025\)](#), Save the Children International



The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security, 2026

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