

The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security

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

Global Conference Report - Nairobi, 2025



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Acknowledgements

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About the Dallaire Institute

The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace, and Security is an international organization working to prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict and violence and to transform cycles of violence. Founded in 2007 by Lieutenant-General (retired) Roméo Dallaire, whose experiences as Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi informed his lifelong commitment to preventing the recruitment and use of children in conflict. The Institute is based at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with regional centres of excellence in Africa and Latin America. As co-developers of The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, the Institute leads efforts to integrate the Vancouver Principles into security sector governance. Supported by public, private, and international contributions, the Dallaire Institute's holistic and innovative approach continues to ensure that children remain at the heart of peace and security efforts worldwide.

Learn more about our work at: <https://www.dallaireinstitute.org/>

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The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security hosted the *Global Conference on Advancing Children’s Roles in Peace Processes and the Vancouver Principles* in Nairobi, Kenya from 17 – 19 November 2025. The conference brought together mediators, governments, security sector actors, civil society, academia, and children and youth. While the conference included participants, knowledge, and practices from across the globe, the main emphasis was on sub-Saharan Africa and related experiences and expertise.

The conference was attended by 98 participants (50 women, 48 men) over three days. Notably, participants featured experienced peace-mediation practitioners, representatives from the Governments of Kenya and Canada, senior officials from the African Union and the United Nations—including representatives from UNICEF and the Office of the Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict—members of civil society, and children and youth.

This report offers a summary of the panels, presentations and workshops delivered throughout the Conference. The views reflected throughout are those of the practitioners, policymakers and subject matter experts—including children and youth—who participated in the Conference.

Goals, Objectives, Expected Outcomes

- ▶ Bringing together stakeholders from international, regional, and national levels
- ▶ Providing a platform for exchanging knowledge, strategies and experiences on the inclusion of children’s issues and perspectives in peace processes
- ▶ Demonstrating the value of including children’s perspectives and issues in peace processes
- ▶ Building sustained partnerships and networks of stakeholders who share a commitment to advancing children’s inclusion in peace processes
- ▶ Launching action-oriented commitments for inclusion of children in peace processes
- ▶ Raising awareness about the Vancouver Principles, specifically Vancouver Principle 14 on peace processes.

Participatory Approach

The conference adopted a participatory approach, embedding interactive workshops and incorporating the voices and experiences of children and youth throughout. For the first time in the Dallaire Institute's history, child participants were invited to take part in the conference itself, sharing their perspectives and directly addressing decision-makers, practitioners, and dignitaries. This was facilitated through partnership with Re-Imagining New Communities (Kenya) which enabled the participation of four children (two girls and two boys aged 11–17) engaged in the Re-Imagining New Communities' Children Led Community Peace Labs (CLCP-Labs) program.

Additionally, five members (three women and two men, under the age of 35) of the Dallaire Institute Youth Advisory Council (YAC) attended the conference in person, while all YAC members were actively involved in the design and strategic development of the conference, with focused leadership in shaping the child- and youth-led sessions. Throughout the conference, children and youth engaged directly in the main conference sessions and participated in parallel, age-appropriate activities focused on peace efforts. The Dallaire Institute and Re-Imagining New Communities jointly developed and implemented safeguarding protocols for the conference, including a risk assessment developed with the children themselves, morning and evening check-ins, designated safeguarding focal points, and mentor partnerships with YAC members.



“Inclusion is not an abstract principle; it is a practice”

*— Dr. Shelly Whitman,
Executive Director of the
Dallaire Institute*



Children are Actors of Peace

Children want to be recognized as contributors with insight and agency, not as symbolic participants. They do not see themselves as merely preparing for a future peace; they understand that they are already shaping peace within their families, schools, and communities.



“... excluding children from peace processes makes the process incomplete. Children are not just victims; they are also actors of peace. This conference helped me understand my role as a young peacebuilder and why my voice matters”

— Juliet (girl, aged 17)

“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 11)



About Vancouver Principle 14

Vancouver Principle 14 (VP14) on Peace Processes focuses on supporting the inclusion of child protection provisions within the terms of peace processes, peace agreements, and post-conflict recovery and reconstruction efforts. It highlights the unique vulnerability and protection needs of children, the importance of their rehabilitation and reintegration into their communities, and the urgent need to prevent and end the recruitment and use of child soldiers to achieve lasting and sustainable peace.

“There can never be lasting peace without actual meaningful inclusion and participation of children within peace processes, peace agreements, and peace-building efforts.”

— Maj. Gen (retired) Ferdinand Safari



Conference Highlights on VP 14

Status of VP 14

Despite repeated calls from the UN Security Council through resolutions, peace agreements have largely failed to prioritize the protection of children (Sean Molloy, *Child Soldiers and Peace Agreements*). Additionally, peace processes have failed to include children's voices and perspectives. This is despite children's right to participate in decisions that impact their lives being enshrined in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and their valuable and unique perspectives that are fundamental to building lasting peace and strengthening social cohesion (Save the Children, *Building Peace with Children*).

Guidelines and normative frameworks do exist for including child protection provisions and children's perspectives in peace processes. In practice, however, implementation is hindered by a lack of awareness, vague or non-specific language, and limited clarity on who is responsible for implementation and monitoring.

When children are involved in peace agreements, their engagement tends to be superficial and often tokenistic, which creates an illusion of inclusion rather than enabling meaningful participation. This exclusion is not experienced uniformly: girls, boys, and children of different ages, abilities, and social backgrounds encounter distinct barriers to participation, which are rarely acknowledged or addressed. International agreements that include children tend to portray them solely as victims and are often vague, narrow in focus, overlooking gendered dimensions and non-combat roles, and fail to adequately address differentiated needs in demobilization and reintegration.

An additional challenge is that children are often conflated with youth or grouped together with women, obscuring the distinct experiences, risks, and needs of each group. This lack of differentiation limits the ability to understand how conflict affects children in specific ways. There is a need for more robust, disaggregated data - at minimum by gender and age, and where possible by disability and other relevant factors - to capture variations in recruitment pathways, exposure to violence, access to services, and reintegration outcomes for girls and boys. Strengthening this evidence base is critical not only for designing peace processes that are responsive to children's realities, but also for ensuring that engagement with youth- and women-led actors complements - rather than substitutes - the direct and meaningful inclusion of children themselves.

1. Implementation Gaps and Weak Accountability

- Implementation of the Vancouver Principles needs budget alignment, engagement by senior leadership, and expertise in government systems.
- Mechanisms for monitoring, resourcing, and accountability are weak.
- Once peace agreements are made, follow-through often collapses.
- Despite the existence of normative frameworks for including children in peace processes, these are not consistently shared with mediators. As a result, these tools seldom influence mediation practice.

2. Lack of Clear, Child- and Youth-Specific Evidence and Analysis

- There is limited disaggregated data in the African context on children recruited and used in armed conflict. Available data is rarely broken down by sex, age, disability, or other relevant factors, limiting understanding of how recruitment patterns, roles, exposure to violence, and reintegration outcomes differ across groups of children. Without this granularity, responses risk being overly generalized and may fail to reach those facing the most acute or specific forms of harm.
- Children's experiences of conflict - and its impacts on their physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development - vary significantly across different stages of childhood. Insufficient differentiation by age obscures these variations and limits the ability to design developmentally appropriate interventions.
- Children and youth are often conflated despite their different needs, rights, and capacities. Definitions of youth are subject to different categorizations. There is often also a lack of clarity around what constitutes a "child," stemming from differences between legal definitions and socio-cultural understandings. These differing interpretations can lead to inconsistencies in how children – particularly older adolescents - are identified, engaged, and protected.

3. Institutional and Political Challenges

- Adult-centric language of peace processes implicitly excludes children and fails to recognize them as stakeholders with a role in peace negotiation.
- High turnover rates within the UN Child Protection Agencies, as well as the current global power dynamics in which the UN has been sidelined in peace negotiations, has contributed to reduced representation of child protection experts and concerns within peace negotiation procedures.
- Member states' lack of resources and technical gaps have slowed the implementation of existing AU child protection frameworks.
- Efforts to include children in peace processes are often seen as challenging by those who benefit from conflict, because meaningful participation by children can disrupt the power dynamics that enable violence to continue.



Peace Means Healing

The children reflected that peace is not limited to the absence of violence. For them, peace also involves healing, emotional expression, and psychosocial wellbeing. They noted that suppressing emotions due to social or community norms can lead to trauma and mental health challenges. Sustainable peace processes must therefore integrate psychosocial dimensions, particularly for children.



“I also learnt that peace is not just about stopping violence but also about healing. Healing involves listening to emotions and allowing people, including children, to express what they feel”

— Juliet (girl, aged 17)

“If we don’t let out our emotions, it can lead us into traumas, mental health and even madness”

— Leshan (boy, aged 13)



How VP 14 Can be Implemented



For Mediators, Negotiators, and Peace Process Facilitators

- Train mediators and negotiators to understand prevention of child-recruitment and use and the link to peace and security so that this can be embedded in child protection language in negotiation outcomes, ceasefire arrangements, and DDR frameworks.
- Develop templates and checklists for mediators to use on child protection and peace mediation.
- Structure peace agreements to include specific child-focused provisions that can guide all sections of the peace agreements – from defence and security, to health and education, to electoral systems, to restorative justice and post-conflict recovery, to the economy and reintegration efforts.
- Develop context-specific mediation guidelines that draw on local traditions and cultures but also recognize international commitments to the protection of children.
- Leverage technology to bring children’s voices from conflict settings directly to mediators and Member States.
- Build capacity in trauma-sensitive communication.



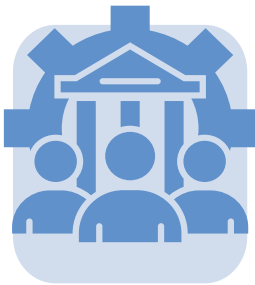
For Peacekeeping Actors & Post-Conflict Mission Personnel

- Ensure they understand their operational role in child protection and preventing child recruitment and how this impacts peace mediation and post-conflict recovery.
- Ensure mandates include planning and preparation to support peace efforts and include specific provisions on children, reflecting the unique role of peacekeepers in preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers and acknowledging that deliberate and targeted national preparations for the contingent – and for individual peacekeepers – are required.
- Build capacity in trauma-sensitive communication.
- Promote good governance, capacity-building, coordination, and trust-building by considering community needs, human security, and people-centered participatory approaches.



For Child-Focused and Community Organizations

- Find creative ways to include children and their voices, beyond formally inviting them to negotiations: consulting schools, child-led fora, and community groups, using intermediaries (teachers, psychologists, local leaders), forming coalitions, and integrating children's perspectives through creative expressions.
- Build the capacity of children to contribute to peace mediation or processes through peace education.
- Explore safe use of social media for children to speak, engage, and participate.



For National Governments & Political Leadership

- Work towards national ownership of child-inclusive peace processes.
- Support the development of context-specific mediation guidelines reflecting local norms and child protection needs.
- Leverage the AU Panel of the Wise to mobilize political will for child protection within member states.



For Donors, Funders, and International Partners

- Increase support for the inclusion of children in peace processes, including resourcing local groups and community organizations and supporting child participation mechanisms.





Children's Perspectives and Contributions

Why Include Children's Perspectives?



Including children's perspectives in peace processes is not an act of charity; it is a strategic approach that reduces the likelihood of future cycles of conflict by addressing the needs and perspectives of those most affected. Children's participation helps build the foundations of future stability, as the conditions for lasting peace depend on involving those who will inherit the outcomes of these processes.



Children also have a fundamental right to participate in shaping decisions that affect their lives. Importantly, peace processes should not be viewed as isolated events but as ongoing pathways. When children engage in these pathways, they gain opportunities to grow, develop, and learn skills essential for social and emotional well-being. This contributes to stronger human capital in post-conflict societies, as participation fosters resilience, agency, and long-term capacity for constructive civic engagement.

Across conflict-affected regions, children and youth are not passive recipients of assistance. They often act as advocates for justice and bring vital lived experience and insight into peace efforts. Despite this, they have historically been treated as observers rather than contributors. Changing this requires creativity, courage, and a commitment to forms of engagement that recognize and value their local knowledge. When children are empowered to help shape solutions, they reinforce the principle that peace processes are a shared responsibility and express a clear desire to participate in creating a different future.

*“The seeds of future conflict are in children...
Durable peace requires children to participate”*

— Dr. Musavengana Chibwana

Children's Intersectional Identities

Children experience conflict in distinct and uneven ways shaped by their social identities, and their participation in peace processes must reflect this diversity. Differences in gender, age, ability, socio-economic status, and other identity markers influence not only how children are affected by conflict, but also how they are perceived, listened to, and included in decision-making spaces. The diversity of children's experiences, coupled with socio-cultural and religious norms that are uniquely expressed in each context, results in varied pathways into association with armed forces, as well as different experiences of harm, resilience, and recovery (Nidhi Kapur & Hannah Thompson, *Beyond the Binary*). As such, peace processes must move beyond treating children as a homogenous group and instead be grounded in an understanding of how identity shapes both vulnerability and agency.

Gender is a critical dimension shaping children's experiences and opportunities for participation. Failing to recognize a diversity of gender perspectives can sideline the experiences of large numbers of children. In many contexts, violations experienced by boys in public spaces - such as recruitment or detention - are more visible and more likely to be documented, while violations occurring in private or less visible spaces - such as sexual violence, exploitation, or forced marriage - disproportionately affecting girls and gender-diverse children, often remain invisible or under-reported. (Save the Children, *Gender Matters*).

Beyond gender, children's experiences also vary due to age, economic background, (dis)ability, religious and ethnic identity, legal status, and other intersectional factors. These social identities shape children's experiences of conflict as well as their capacity to engage in civic life and peace processes. For example, younger children, children with disabilities, or those living in remote or conflict-affected areas may face additional barriers to being reached, heard, or meaningfully engaged. These overlapping factors can compound exclusion, particularly for children who are already marginalized within their communities.

When designing interventions to support the inclusion of children's perspectives within peace processes, peace agreements, and post-conflict recovery and reconstruction efforts, it is essential to actively account for these differences. Failure to do so risks reinforcing existing inequalities, privileging more visible or accessible groups of children, and overlooking those whose experiences and perspectives are most critical to sustainable peace. Ensuring inclusive, safe, and context-responsive participation requires deliberate strategies to reach and support diverse groups of children, including those who are often excluded from formal participation mechanisms.

Best Practices for Meaningfully and Safely Including Children's Perspectives in Peace Processes

Mediators have an important role in supporting the participation of children in peace processes. While it is not within a mediator's mandate to define the scope of the negotiations, they may have unique opportunities to raise awareness and introduce child protection issues into the agenda. Given their position, it is important for mediators to move beyond the notion that children only need protection, towards recognizing the strength and agency of children to participate in peace processes.

These guidelines assist mediators, peace negotiation support teams, and peacebuilding organizations seeking to meaningfully and safely integrate children's needs, perspectives and participation into formal and informal peace processes.

- ▶ Create parallel tracks to include children's perspectives – effective approaches could include consulting schools, child-led fora and community groups to gather children's perspectives; forming a coalition to raise children's voices; and working with intermediaries (e.g., teachers, psychologists, local leaders, trusted mentors). Including children's perspectives does not necessarily mean inviting children to the negotiating table.
- ▶ Create safe spaces for children to express themselves – this can include the integration of creative approaches such as art, storytelling, drawing, or movement, as well as the use of child-friendly language and involvement of trusted adults and peers. Space and time must also be provided for children to ask questions, express uncertainty, and learn at their own pace.
- ▶ Provide clear guidance on what is expected of child participants. Children who live through loss need to know what to expect and why they are being asked to participate. Predictability is important as it restores their sense of peace and alleviates trauma.
- ▶ Recognize and seek to represent the diversity of children's experiences (e.g., age, gender, disability, background, etc.) as children are not a homogenous group.
- ▶ Define age cohorts and create age-appropriate programs with bridges between child and youth programs. Recognize the different safeguarding thresholds for children and youth and the different risks for children and youth. For example, children have a higher risk of being tokenized while youth are at a higher risk of being politicized, categorized as troublemakers, and excluded from the process.
- ▶ Encourage children to speak for themselves with agency and ensure that their participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time.
- ▶ Treat children's engagement as a process, not an event. Support children before, during, and after engagement.

- Preparatory support could allow children to practice expressing their thoughts clearly and confidently and ensure safeguarding principles are in place.
 - After the engagement, children should be involved in a reflection to process their emotions regarding the engagement.
- ▶ Make children’s participation a structured obligation, based on political will, adequate resources, and sustained commitment. To achieve this, children’s inclusion in peace processes could be made a contingency for funding (similar to the requirement for women to be present); however, caution would still have to be exercised as presence can become tokenistic and does not necessarily mean that children’s inclusion is meaningful or impactful.

“Children are telling us that they want to be part of shaping a different future”

— Mr. Arthur Abuya Olanda

Reframing Children’s Participation in Global Peace and Security

The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace, and Security advocates for an urgent reframing on how children’s participation and protection in global peace and security are conceived of and understood. Recognizing that children are active participants in their worlds, there is a need to center the agency, perspectives, and their participation as integral to disrupting cycles of violence and achieving sustainable peace and security.

“As both potential victims of and participants in armed conflict, children must meaningfully participate in peacebuilding. Therefore, any serious attempt to strengthen and advance the human rights and peacebuilding nexus will require the prioritization of the protection of the rights and participation of children” (Shelly Whitman and Madeline Zutt, *Why Canada Needs to Promote a Children, Peace, and Security Agenda*).

Drawing on the concept of the child as a “citizen in waiting” (Barbara Arneil, 2002), and recognizing that even very young children are active participants in their communities, it follows that the perspectives and views of children must be heard and prioritized in peace and security agreements that directly impact them.



Challenging Adult-Centric Peace Processes

Children emphasized that the quality of their participation is largely shaped by adult attitudes and systems. Where adults create safe, respectful, and well-facilitated spaces, children engage thoughtfully and responsibly; where participation is rushed, tokenistic, or overly controlled, children feel silenced or undervalued.

Creating safe and meaningful opportunities for children to be heard can reaffirm their roles as peace actors within their communities.



“... Barriers such as age, fear, and adult perceptions prevent children from participating fully. We must create opportunities for children to engage, speak, and be heard. Supporting children builds confidence and strengthens peacebuilding efforts in communities”

— Meshack (boy, aged 14)



A woman with short, curly dark hair and glasses is smiling and speaking into a microphone. She is wearing a red and gold patterned top. The background is a solid blue color.

Security Sector Reform

Security Sector Reform (SSR) provides a key opportunity to integrate child protection provisions into security sector trainings and operating procedures, peace negotiations and agreements, and associated disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. SSR can integrate mandatory practical child protection training for security and defence forces and include provisions on child protection in standard operating procedures, specifically in the context of detention and transfer, and rules of engagement. There is also the opportunity to meaningfully and safely engage children who have been recruited and used by armed forces in DDR efforts as part of broader SSR.

Conference Highlights on Security Sector Reform and Peace Processes

Effective Security Sector Reform (SSR) depends on more than economic incentives—it requires national ownership, public legitimacy, accountability, and long-term trust-building. Because conflicts are shaped by internal divisions, geopolitical interests, and power asymmetries, “African solutions to African problems,” may fall short, instead requiring multilateral support, coordination, and shared political commitment.

Many peace agreements fail at the implementation stage due to weak political will, inadequate DDR and SSR processes, limited inclusion of youth and children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, and a lack of sustained post-agreement engagement.

To address these challenges, SSR needs long-term investment and trust-building that is aligned with national institutions, while also opening space for meaningful participation from civil society. Crucially, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts must be designed in consultation with children and youth—especially those directly affected by conflict—with their priorities incorporated into program design from the outset.

Good Practices and Opportunities for Security Sector Reform

- ▶ The African Union (AU) can support Member States through knowledge tools, guidance, dialogue, and coordination, including through forums and conferences that promote people-centered approaches, and targeted technical support, such as monitoring and evaluation for security sector reforms.
- ▶ Gender mainstreaming – integrating a gender equality perspective at all stages of SSR – is key for conflict prevention.
- ▶ The AU Panel of the Wise can play a key role in mobilizing political will and trust.
- ▶ Where SSR is inclusive and well governed, it can help legitimize state authority and rebuild trust between citizens and the state.
- ▶ SSR must be people-centered and emphasize human security. Even small steps towards participatory approaches can create meaningful change.
- ▶ Child protection is essential to the function of SSR, requiring accountability, transparency, and ethical governance.
 - Commanders must render child protection non-negotiable, which requires a specific high-level mandate as well as field level standards.
 - Child protection should be included in audits and daily reporting to hold commanders accountable through military authority and mechanisms. Joint civilian and military mechanisms that align with local authority structures should also be utilized to strengthen legitimacy.
 - Retired senior officers can facilitate progress by working across political and military domains, championing policy coherence, translating principles that align with national defence policies and acting as independent monitors to parliament, ministries and audits without compromising chain of military of command.
- ▶ Vancouver Principle 14 should be integrated into training and doctrine, ensuring that child protection considerations are part of planning processes, rules of engagement and daily routines and exercises, and that commanders clearly understand their responsibility in terms of child protection.

Recommended Actions for the Security Sector



Develop long-term institutional approaches to equip security forces with the governance, coordination, and trust-building skills needed to support people-centered and child-sensitive security operations.



Strengthen mechanisms within security institutions that reinforce accountability, transparency, and coherence across political and military domains.



Engage retired senior officers as mentors, conveners, and facilitators to bridge political and military spaces, champion policy coherence, and support translation of child-protection principles into national defence policies and operational practice.



Build durable, system-level capacity for integrating community perspectives—including children's perspectives—into planning, operations, and evaluation processes.



Ensure security institutions coordinate with civilian, local, and community actors through formalized and predictable channels that reinforce legitimacy and build trust over time.

Commitments

To close the Conference, participants engaged in a participatory session to develop commitments aligned with Vancouver Principle 14. The goal was to integrate learnings and discussions from throughout the Conference to develop actionable commitments.

Working in small groups, participants explored the following questions:

- 1. What is a key problem you are trying to solve (related to inclusion of child protection or children's voices in peace processes)?**
- 2. Which stakeholder(s) could make this change happen?**
- 3. Who else needs to be involved?**
- 4. If this change becomes reality, what does success look like?**



The following themes emerged from commitments developed by participants:

Child participation, voice, and agency

Several commitments focused on meaningfully including children in peace processes from the outset. These centered on building child-friendly, people-centered environments in mediation where children can freely express themselves and are engaged from the initial steps of the process. Tangible actions stemming from these commitments included conducting conferences and seminars with children to raise awareness of their perspectives and build capacity with stakeholders, conducting intergenerational dialogues, and advocating for a dedicated seat for children within AU and UN peace and security decision-making spaces.

Key actors include children, youth representatives, parents and caregivers, teachers and schools, community-based organizations (CBOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), mediators and mediation teams, religious leaders, local community leaders, governments and relevant ministries, national peace councils, UNICEF, child-focused INGOs, academia, and media.

Safety, safeguarding, and psychosocial wellbeing

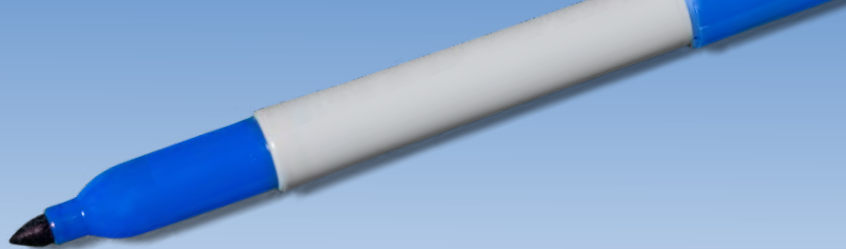
A second key theme was the need to foreground children's physical, psychological, and emotional safety during peace processes. The ultimate objective of these commitments was to ensure children could express themselves without re-experiencing trauma and to build trust, dignity, and safety into peace processes. Tangible actions proposed included integrating psychological assessment and psychosocial supports into child-related peace and protection policies, addressing moral injury as a legitimate harm and embedding an awareness of moral injury into peace frameworks, and investing in reintegration, community protection mechanisms, and community-level safeguarding policies.

Key actors include children, parents and caregivers, psychologists and clinical or trauma experts, social workers, community members, CBOs, CSOs, religious leaders, government ministries, national governments, regional bodies, NGOs and INGOs.

Systems and standards

A third group of commitments focused on strengthening legal and policy frameworks related to child protection in Member States—including parliamentary implementation of laws, budget allocations, and monitoring initiatives.

Key actors include Governments and state authorities, parliament and legislators, security sector actors (military and police), media, African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), CSOs, academia and research institutions, religious and cultural leaders, and national peace councils.



Capacity Building, Training, and Knowledge Development

This theme focused on building the skills and competencies of various actors to better integrate child protection provisions and children's perspectives into peace processes. Commitments in this group aimed to specifically build mediators' capacity for child-inclusive mediation, build children's capacity to participate in peace processes by increasing their understanding of their rights, train mental health experts and facilitators, and endorse data-driven assessment, evidence-based indicators, and child-friendly research methods. There was also emphasis on integrating Vancouver Principle 14 and GBA+ protocols into training and community partnerships to build capacity of the security sector to better understand and incorporate children's voices and needs.

Key actors include mediators, children, governments, educational and training institutions, CSOs, NGOs and INGOs, security sector actors (military and police), donors, research and data institutions, and MHPSS experts.

What: Make child protection and child involvement a non-negotiable minimum standard in peace processes and interventions.

Who: Military (state-backed); media; ACERWC experts; CSOs; academia; religious and cultural leaders.

How: (1) Integrate child protection into military training and doctrine (2) Provide thought leadership (3) Develop materials and guidelines, including for pre-deployment peacekeeping training.

Measure of success: Existence of child protection guidelines and units; end to recruitment and use of children.

Governance, Funding, and Sustainability

The final group of commitments focused on ensuring long-term commitment, ownership, and resources for children's participation in peace processes. These commitments call for investments in child participation and dedicated funding for child inclusion and participation initiatives, parliamentary oversight and monitoring, and multi-stakeholder coordination.

Key actors include Governments, parliament, donors, CSOs, NGOs and INGOs, CBOs, and security sector institutions.

What: Advocate for a dedicated seat for children within AU and UN peace and security decision-making spaces.

Who: UNICEF; child-focused INGOs; CSOs; children's forums; academia; media; government.

How: (1) Generate evidence on the value of children's participation (2) Produce and disseminate petitions (3) Build children's capacity to participate.

Measure of success: Increased instances of children consulted by AU and UN bodies.

Taken together, these commitments demonstrate a strong, cross-sectoral willingness to move from discussion to implementation, anchoring Vancouver Principle 14 in practical, measurable action. They highlight a unified commitment to advancing child-inclusive peace processes in ways that prioritize safety, sustainability, and meaningful participation.

“Inclusion is not moral charity, it is a strategic necessity to prevent the next cycles of violence”

— Dr. Juan Diaz-Prinz



Recommended Actions

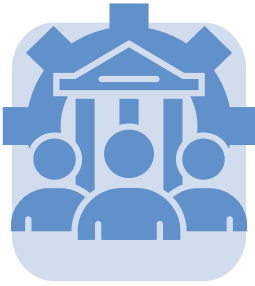
The following audience-specific recommendations translate the Conference's commitments into practical actions that can be implemented across systems, sectors, and levels of decision-making. Organized by the actors best positioned to carry them forward, this section provides a clear snapshot of actions to advance meaningful, safe, and sustained child participation in peace processes. By outlining distinct responsibilities while minimizing overlap, these recommendations offer actionable roadmaps for operationalizing Vancouver Principle 14 and supporting more inclusive, accountable, and child-centered peace and security outcomes.



Mediators and Peace Process Teams

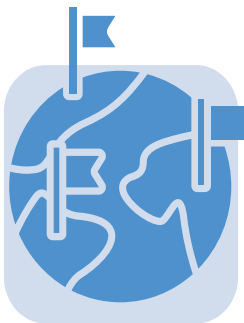
- ▶ Establish clear entry points for children's perspectives across the process (scoping, pre-talks, agenda setting, shuttle diplomacy, agreement drafting, follow-up).
- ▶ Apply context-specific mediation guidelines rooted in local traditions and cultures; integrate peace education and capacity-strengthening for children where appropriate.
- ▶ Use creative, community-based methods beyond the negotiating table (school-based consultations, engagement with child-led fora, community dialogues, trusted intermediaries such as teachers, psychologists, and local leaders).
- ▶ Ensure psychologically safe, developmentally appropriate participation (voluntary, confidential, well-facilitated, trauma-informed).
- ▶ Adopt and operationalize minimum standards for child participation, keeping children and youth as distinct tracks with intentional bridges.

- ▶ Complete training in child protection frameworks, trauma-informed mediation, child-friendly materials, and safeguarding across design, implementation, and policy cycles.
- ▶ Leverage safe, moderated digital tools; explore ethical, practical uses of AI with strong safeguards.
- ▶ Collaborate through formal channels with country task forces, UN agencies, government counterparts, local leaders, psychologists, social workers, and law enforcement.



Governments

- ▶ Create or strengthen national guidance and legal/policy frameworks that enable ethical, age-appropriate child participation in peace and security.
- ▶ Formally endorse and implement the Vancouver Principles, align budgets, assign senior leadership responsibility, and embed expertise in relevant ministries.
- ▶ Define age cohorts (children vs. youth) in policy and programming; sustain separate participation pathways with coordination mechanisms.
- ▶ Conduct risk and needs assessments prior to interventions; ensure refugee children’s perspectives are systematically included.
- ▶ Map existing mediation structures and support local networks (courts, chiefs, youth initiatives) to enable implementation and continuity.



Regional and International Institutions (AU, UN, RECs)

- ▶ Apply lessons from the AU Youth, Peace and Security Framework to strengthen guidance, training, and tools for child-inclusive mediation; support global clarity on age cohorts by maintaining distinct children and youth participation tracks with intentional bridges.
- ▶ Champion meaningful inclusion of children in peace and security decision-making—including advocating dedicated seats within AU/UN spaces.
- ▶ Reinforce implementation of the Vancouver Principles through formal endorsement, senior-level engagement, budget alignment, and embedded expertise across systems.



Civil Society, Community Organizations, and Child-Focused NGOs

- ▶ Facilitate safe, voluntary, confidential, and culturally appropriate engagement spaces; provide trusted adult support and referral pathways. Adapt and operationalize existing tools (simplified formats, local languages, low-tech options); prioritize locally grounded interventions.
- ▶ Build coalitions (schools, CBOs, faith actors, youth groups) to amplify children’s voices, including those displaced or otherwise marginalized.
- ▶ Partner with researchers and trainers to strengthen practitioner capacity and develop child-friendly methods.



Researchers, Trainers, and Capacity-Building Institutions

- ▶ Develop standardized training on child participation in peace processes, trauma-informed practice, and safeguarding for mediators and frontline facilitators.
- ▶ Produce child-friendly methodologies, tools, and evidence-based indicators for child-inclusive mediation.
- ▶ Evaluate impact and disseminate lessons learned, including from the AU Youth, Peace and Security Framework; clarify and apply age cohort distinctions across research and curricula.
- ▶ Provide secure, moderated platforms for direct, protected communication between children and decision-makers. Embed privacy, content moderation, and digital safeguarding by design.
- ▶ Pilot responsible AI for documentation, analysis, and translation—with explicit risk controls and data protection measures.



Donors

- ▶ Provide predictable financing for child-inclusive mediation and child-centered peace programs; fund tool adaptation, local capacity, and digital safeguards.
- ▶ Consider linking funding to demonstrable commitments to meaningful child participation in peace processes and adherence to minimum standards.
- ▶ Support joint advocacy and coalition efforts that elevate children’s voices in peace processes.

Toolkit

This toolkit is compiled from materials highlighted by panelists and speakers throughout the conference. It reflects the frameworks, training tools, and institutional guidance that practitioners identified as most relevant to advancing child-sensitive approaches in the peace and security sector.

Resources to Help Mediators Include Child Protection Provisions in Peace Agreements



Guidelines

→ *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 (OSRSG-CAAC). 2020.

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Practical-guidance-for-mediators-to-protect-children-in-situations-of-armed-conflict.pdf>

→ *African Union Mediation Support Handbook*. The African Union and ACCORD. 2014: Revised.

<https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/06-au-mediation-support-handbook-2014.pdf>

Checklists



→ *Checklist for Drafting children and Armed Conflict Provisions in Ceasefire and Peace Agreements*. Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. 2016.

<https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/Checklist-for-CAC-relevant-provisions-in-peace-agreements-FINAL-10-12-16.pdf>

→ *A Policy Checklist on Building the CPS Agenda Together*. The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security. 2022.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/632482dc1b943212b681b181/t/633461d56584f356b279e01b/1664377301861/Dallaire-Institute-CPS-Policy-Checklist-brochure.pdf>



Background Context

- *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, specifically Article 22: Armed Conflicts.* African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), The African Union. 1990.
https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36804-treaty-african_charter_on_rights_welfare_of_the_child.pdf
- *United Nations Security Council - Children and Armed Conflict (UNSC CAAC) Resolutions*
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/children-and-armed-conflict/>
- *United Nations Security Council - Women, Peace and Security (UNSC WPS) Resolutions*
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/women-peace-and-security/>

Report



- *Child Soldiers and Peace Agreements.* Sean Molloy, PeaceRep Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform. 2023.
<https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Child-Soldiers-and-Peace-Agreements.pdf>

Core Resources on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC)

Training



- *The Children and Armed Conflict Primer.* United Nations System Staff College.
(Available in [*English*](#), [*French*](#) and [*Arabic*](#))
- *Children and Armed Conflict Advanced Training.* OSRSG-CAAC.
<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/advanced-training/>



Background Context

African Union, The Peace and Security Council. <https://au.int/en/psc>

African Network of Women in Conflict Prevention and Peace Mediation (FemWise–Africa) - a subsidiary body of the Panel of the Wise.

<https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/bringing-women-to-the-table-the-evolution-of-femwise-africa/>

Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers Implementation Guidance, specifically Vancouver Principle 14 on Peace Processes. Government of Canada. 2019.

<https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/igvp-20190614.pdf>

Report



Children Affected by Armed Conflict Continental Strategy 2022-2025. Save the Children.

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/CONTINENTAL-CAAC-STRATEGY-2022-2025.pdf>

Training for Security Sector Actors (UN Peacekeepers)

Training



Child Protection for UN Military e-learning course. International Peace Support Training Centre.

<https://www.peaceopstraining.org/courses/child-protection-en-2025/>

Resources on Including Children and Youth in Peace Building



Guidelines

- *The Child Peacebuilder Guide: 10 Pillars for Practicing Peace, A Practical Framework for Children. Re-Imagining New Communities.* 2026.
https://www.rncommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/The-Child-Peacebuilder-Guide_10-Pillars-for-Practicing-Peace.pdf
- *Building Peace with Children: Expanding Children’s Participation in Peace Processes.* Save the Children. 2024. (Available in English, French, Spanish)
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/building-peace-with-children-expanding-childrens-participation-in-peace-processes>
- *Guidelines for the Establishment of Effective National Youth Councils in the COMESA Region.* COMESA. 2025
https://www.comesa.int/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/COMESA_NYC_Guidelines_Eng.pdf
- *Guidelines on Child Participation.* African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). 2022.
https://www.acerwc.africa/sites/default/files/2022-10/ACERWC%20Guidelines%20on%20Child%20Participation_English.pdf

Checklists



- *Practice Standards in Children’s Participation.* Save the Children. 2005.
(Available in English, French, Arabic)
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/practice-standards-childrens-participation>
- *The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children’s Participation.* Save the Children. 2021. (Available in English, French, Arabic, Portuguese, Albanian, Serbian, Korean, Ukrainian).
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/nine-basic-requirements-meaningful-and-ethical-childrens-participation>



Background Context

→ *Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security*. The African Union
https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39150-doc-continental_framework_on_youth_peace_and_security_-_english.pdf

→ *Re-Imagining New Communities – Children-led Community Peace Labs*.
<https://www.rncommunities.org/children-led-community-peace-labs/>

Report



→ *Outcome Document of the Continental Stocktaking Conference on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS)*. COMESA. 2025
https://www.comesa.int/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Final1-Draft-Outcome-Document-of-Continental-Stocktaking-Delegates-Draft-December-8_Rev-ASGP-002.pdf





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https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/SWOC_report_2024_compressed.pdf

Edwards, J. Fylkesnes, G. K., Salarkia, K., Sapiezynska, E., & Stromme, A. (2020). *Stop the war on children: Gender Matters*. Save the Children.
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/ch1413553.pdf>

Freedson, J. & Kemper, Y. (2024). *Building peace with children: Expanding children's participation in peace processes*. Save the Children.
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Building-Peace-with-Children-2024-FINAL-ENG-PDF.pdf>

Kapur, N & Thompson, H. (2021). Beyond the binary: Why gender matters in the recruitment and use of children. *Allons-y*, 5, pp. 20-35.
<https://doi.org/10.15273/allons-y.v5i0.10214>

Molloy, S. (2023). *Child soldiers and peace agreements*. PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.
<https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Child-Soldiers-and-Peace-Agreements.pdf>

Whiteman, S. & Zutt, M. (2024). Why Canada needs to promote a children, peace, and security agenda. In K. Van Houten & A. Neve (Eds.), *Hand in hand? Canada at the human rights and peacebuilding nexus* (pp. 111-127). Canada and International Affairs. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-72182-3_6

GLOBAL CONFERENCE ON ADVANCING
CHILDREN'S ROLE IN PEACE PROCESSES
AND THE VANCOUVER PRINCIPLES



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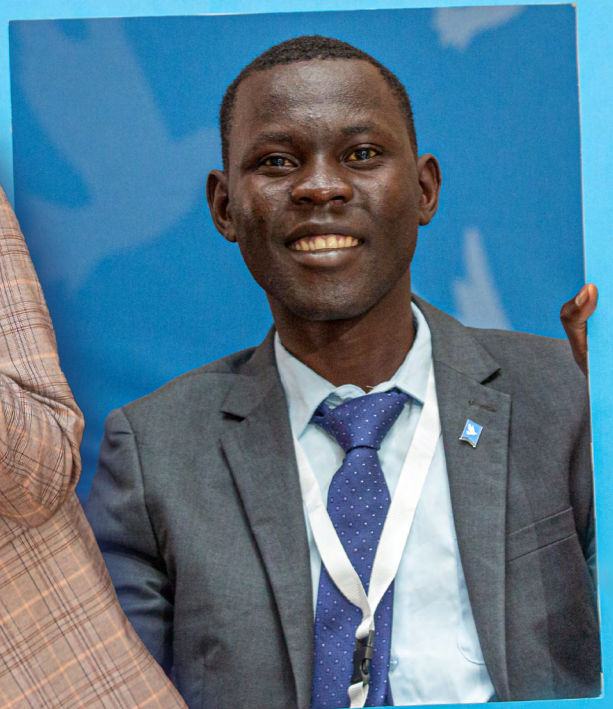
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Practitioner Resources

To support the practical application of the findings and recommendations outlined in this report, the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security has developed five companion products focused on advancing children's meaningful participation in peace processes. These resources are designed for practitioners, policymakers, and partners, and can be printed and used as stand-alone tools to support child-inclusive, safe, and effective peacebuilding practice across diverse contexts.



Best Practices for Meaningfully and Safely Including Children’s Perspectives in Peace Processes

Mediators have an important role in supporting the participation of children in peace processes. While it is not within a mediator’s mandate to define the scope of the negotiations, they may have unique opportunities to raise awareness and introduce child protection issues into the agenda. Given their position, it is important for mediators to move beyond the notion that children only need protection, towards recognizing the strength and agency of children to participate in peace processes.

These guidelines come from the Dallaire Institute’s *Global Conference on Advancing Children’s Roles in Peace Processes and the Vancouver Principles* in Nairobi in 2025. These guidelines assist mediators, peace negotiation support teams, and peacebuilding organizations seeking to meaningfully and safely integrate children’s perspectives into formal and informal peace processes.

- ✓ Create parallel tracks to include children’s perspectives – effective approaches could include consulting schools and community groups to gather children’s perspectives; forming a coalition to raise children’s voices; and working with intermediaries (e.g., teachers, psychologists, local leaders, trusted mentors). Including children’s perspectives does not necessarily mean inviting children to the negotiating table.
- ✓ Create safe spaces for children to express themselves – this can include the integration of creative approaches such as art, storytelling, drawing, or movement, as well as the use of child-friendly language and involvement of trusted adults and peers. Space and time must also be provided for children to ask questions, express uncertainty, and learn at their own pace.
- ✓ Provide clear guidance on what is expected of child participants. Children who live through loss need to know what to expect and why they are being asked to participate. Predictability is important as it restores their sense of peace and alleviates trauma.

- ✓ Recognize and seek to represent the diversity of children's experiences (e.g., age, gender, disability, background, etc.) as children are not a homogenous group.
- ✓ Define age cohorts and create age-appropriate programs with bridges between child and youth programs. Recognize the different safeguarding thresholds for children and youth and the different risks for children and youth. For example, children have a higher risk of being tokenized while youth are at a higher risk of being politicized, categorized as troublemakers, and excluded from the process.
- ✓ Encourage children to speak for themselves with agency, and ensure that their participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time
- ✓ Treat children's engagement as a process, not an event. Support children before, during, and after engagement.
 - ▶ Preparatory support could allow children to practice expressing their thoughts clearly and confidently and ensure safeguarding principles are in place.
 - ▶ After the engagement, children should be involved in a reflection to process their emotions regarding the engagement.
- ✓ Make children's participation a structured obligation, based on political will, adequate resources, and sustained commitment. To achieve this, children's inclusion in peace processes could be made a contingency for funding (similar to the requirement for women to be present); however, caution would still have to be exercised as presence can become tokenistic and does not necessarily mean that children's inclusion is meaningful or impactful.

Good Practices and Opportunities for Security Sector Reform

Effective Security Sector Reform (SSR) depends on more than economic incentives—it requires national ownership, public legitimacy, accountability, and long-term trust-building. Because conflicts are shaped by internal divisions, geopolitical interests, and power asymmetries, “African solutions to African problems,” may fall short, requiring multilateral support, coordination, and shared political commitment.

Many peace agreements fail at the implementation stage due to weak political will, inadequate DDR and SSR processes, limited inclusion of youth and children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, and a lack of sustained post-agreement engagement.

To address these challenges, SSR needs long-term investment and trust-building that is aligned with national institutions, while also opening space for meaningful participation from civil society. Crucially, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts must be designed in consultation with children and youth—especially those directly affected by conflict—with their priorities incorporated into program design from the outset.

These guidelines come from the Dallaire Institute’s *Global Conference on Advancing Children’s Roles in Peace Processes* and the Vancouver Principles in Nairobi in 2025.

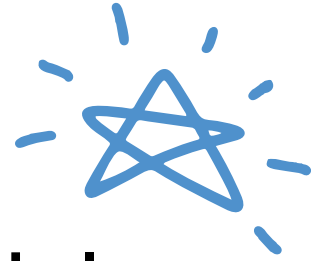
- ✓ The African Union (AU) can support Member States through knowledge tools, guidance, dialogue, and coordination, including through forums and conferences that promote people-centered approaches, and targeted technical support, such as monitoring and evaluation for security sector reforms.
- ✓ Gender mainstreaming – integrating a gender equality perspective at all stages of SSR – is key for conflict prevention.
- ✓ The AU Panel of the Wise can play a key role in mobilizing political will and trust.
- ✓ Where SSR is inclusive and well governed, it can help legitimize state authority and rebuild trust between citizens and the state.
- ✓ SSR must be people-centered and emphasize human security. Even small steps towards participatory approaches can create meaningful change.

- ✓ Child protection is essential to the function of SSR, requiring accountability, transparency, and ethical governance.
 - ▶ Commanders must render child protection non-negotiable, which requires a specific high-level mandate as well as field level standards.
 - ▶ Child protection should be included in audits and daily reporting to hold commanders accountable through military authority and mechanisms. Joint civilian and military mechanisms that align with local authority structures should also be utilized to strengthen legitimacy.
 - ▶ Retired senior officers can facilitate progress by working across political and military domains, championing policy coherence, translating principles that align with national defense policies, and acting as independent monitors to parliament, ministries and audit without compromising chain of military of command.
- ✓ Vancouver Principle 14 should be integrated into training and doctrine, ensuring that protection considerations are part of planning processes, rules of engagement and daily routines and exercises, and that commanders clearly understand their responsibility in terms of child protection.

Action Recommendations for the Security Sector

- ✓ Develop long-term institutional approaches to equip security forces with the governance, coordination, and trust-building skills needed to support people-centered and child-sensitive security operations.
- ✓ Strengthen mechanisms within security institutions that reinforce accountability, transparency, and coherence across political and military domains.
- ✓ Engage retired senior officers as mentors, conveners, and facilitators to bridge political and military spaces, champion policy coherence, and support translation of child-protection principles into national defense policies and operational practice.
- ✓ Build durable, system-level capacity for integrating community perspectives—including children’s perspectives—into planning, operations, and evaluation processes.
- ✓ Ensure security institutions coordinate with civilian, local, and community actors through formalized and predictable channels that reinforce legitimacy and build trust over time.

Checklist for Meaningfully and Safely Engaging Children in Global Conferences and Events



Mediators have an important role in supporting the participation of children in peace processes. While it is not within a mediator's mandate to define the scope of the negotiations, they may have unique opportunities to raise awareness and introduce child protection issues into the agenda. Given their position, it is important for mediators to move beyond the notion that children only need protection, towards recognizing the strength and agency of children to participate in peace building.

These guidelines come from the Dallaire Institute's *Global Conference on Advancing Children's Roles in Peace Processes and the Vancouver Principles* in Nairobi in 2025. These guidelines assist mediators, peace negotiation support teams, and peacebuilding organizations seeking to meaningfully and safely integrate children's perspectives into formal and informal peace processes,

Before the event

Hold preparatory sessions with participating children to build understanding, confidence, and ethical readiness for engaging in a high-level international space. Specifically, these preparatory sessions should:

Ensure that children understand:

- The purpose of the event
- The roles of different stakeholders
- The importance of their own voices within peace and security conversations

Support children to reflect on their personal experiences and community realities, identify issues they feel strongly about, and practice expressing their thoughts clearly and confidently.

Create a safe and supportive environment where children can ask questions, express uncertainty, and learn at their own pace.

Emphasize agency over performance and work with children to ensure they understand that there are no “right answers” and that their role is not to impress adults but to speak honestly and respectfully.



During the event

Implement a comprehensive child safeguarding and risk management approach to prioritize the safety, wellbeing, and dignity of the participating children during the event.

Involve children, where appropriate, in the development of risk assessment and safeguarding measures.

Provide child-friendly printouts outlining steps children should take if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Ensure children are aware of their rights and available reporting and support mechanisms.

Provide a dedicated child-friendly space that children can access throughout the event for rest, emotional regulation, and safety.

Hold structured debrief sessions with children and accompanying staff to process experiences, process their emotions, and respond promptly to emerging concerns. This could be done in the morning, during lunch breaks, and in the evening.

Ensure children’s chaperones and/or designated staff are present at all times to provide supervision, guidance, and emotional support

Children must retain the right to decline participation in any activity, panel, or discussion without consequence. Engagement should not be tokenistic, pressured, or emotionally exploitative

Create platforms that allow children to speak for themselves, sharing their reflections, experiences, and lessons from their own peacebuilding journeys, rather than having adults speaking on their behalf.

Provide dedicated psychological support throughout the event to ensure children have someone to talk to whenever they require psychosocial support.

After the event

Organize guided post-event reflection sessions to support children in meaningfully processing their participation and articulating lessons learnt.

Share outcomes of the event with participating children, including how their contributions were used, referenced, or integrated into reports or policy discussions. This reinforces accountability, respect, and sustained engagement.

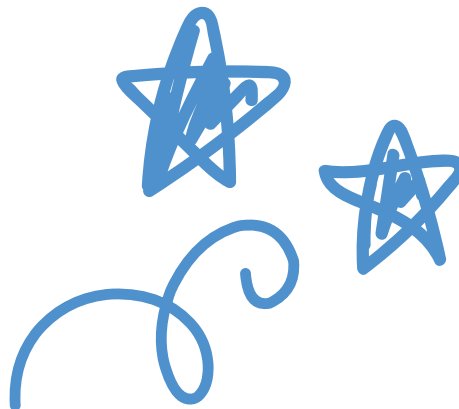


Children who participated at the Dallaire Institute's *Global Conference on Advancing Children's Roles in Peace Processes and the Vancouver Principles*, held in Nairobi in 2025, shared the following best practices for children's involvement in events.

Intentionally include children in event planning and panel discussions from the outset to enable meaningful, informed, and confident participation.

Secure dedicated psychosocial and mental health support professionals who are familiar with the participating children and available throughout the conference to provide timely and appropriate support.

Schedule prior meetings and bonding sessions for children with their assigned mentors or buddies to build trust, emotional safety, and confidence before the event.





Children's Perspectives on Peace

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

– Leshan (boy, aged 13).

Recognizing that children are active participants in their worlds, including children’s perspectives in peace processes is not an act of charity; it is a strategic approach that reduces the likelihood of future cycles of conflict by addressing the needs and perspectives of those most affected.

Children’s participation helps build the foundations of future stability, as the conditions for lasting peace depend on involving those who will inherit the outcomes of these processes.

In this special feature, young peacebuilders who participated at the Dallaire Institute’s *Global Conference on Advancing Children’s Roles in Peace Processes and the Vancouver Principles* in Nairobi in November 2025 share their perspectives on the role of children in peacebuilding and peace processes.





Children are Actors of Peace

Children are asking to be recognized as contributors with insight and agency, not as symbolic participants. They do not see themselves as merely preparing for a future peace; they understand that they are already shaping peace within their families, schools, and communities.

“... excluding children from peace processes makes the process incomplete. Children are not just victims; they are also actors of peace. This conference helped me understand my role as a young peacebuilder and why my voice matters”

– Juliet (girl, aged 17)

“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 11)

Challenging Adult-Centric Peace Processes

Children emphasized that the quality of their participation is largely shaped by adult attitudes and systems. Where adults create safe, respectful, and well-facilitated spaces, children engage thoughtfully and responsibly; where participation is rushed, tokenistic, or overly controlled, children feel silenced or undervalued.

Creating safe and meaningful opportunities for children to be heard can reaffirm their roles as peace actors within their communities.

“Barriers such as age, fear, and adult perceptions prevent children from participating fully. We must create opportunities for children to engage, speak, and be heard. Supporting children builds confidence and strengthens peacebuilding efforts in communities”

– Meshack (boy, aged 14)





Peace Means Healing

The children reflected that peace is not limited to the absence of violence. For them, peace also involves healing, emotional expression, and psychosocial wellbeing. They noted that suppressing emotions due to social or community norms can lead to trauma and mental health challenges. Sustainable peace processes must therefore integrate psychosocial dimensions, particularly for children.

“I also learnt that peace is not just about stopping violence but also about healing. Healing involves listening to emotions and allowing people, including children, to express what they feel”

– Juliet (girl, aged 17)

“If we don’t let out our emotions, it can lead us into traumas, mental health and even madness”

– Leshan (boy, aged 13)

A POEM FOR PEACE

Sometimes it feels small, like a quiet breath.
It is the whisper of morning light.
Soft as a dove taking a gentle flight,
And when I finally notice it, it wraps around me
softly like a warm hug I didn't even ask for.

It's the calm that settles a restless mind

It is the song that rivers sing as they flow

A tender of hope in everything, chooses love instead of fear
And when I finally notice it, it wraps around me softly
like a warm hug I didn't even ask for.

If it was everywhere, no blood could have been shed.
No war and violence could be experienced.

A POEM FOR PEACE

A poem by Leshan Kwanzu

Sometimes it feels small, like a quiet breath.
It is the whisper of morning light.
Soft as a dove taking a gentle flight,
And when I finally notice it, it wraps around me
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It is the song that rivers sing as they flow
A tender of hope in everything, chooses love instead of fear
And when I finally notice it, it wraps around me softly
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If it was everywhere, no blood could have been shed.
No war and violence could be experienced.

In Conclusion

Children have a fundamental right to participate in shaping decisions that affect their lives. When children are engaged in peace processes, they gain opportunities to grow, develop, and learn skills essential for social and emotional wellbeing. This contributes to stronger human capital in post-conflict societies, as participation fosters resilience, agency, and long-term capacity for constructive civic engagement.

Across conflict affected regions, children and youth are not passive recipients of assistance. They often act as advocates for justice and bring vital lived experience and insight into peace processes. Despite this, they have historically been treated as observers rather than contributors. Changing this requires creativity, courage, and a commitment to forms of engagement that recognize and value their lived experience. When children are empowered to help shape solutions, they reinforce the principle that peace is a shared responsibility and express a clear desire to participate in creating a different future.

“From the conference, I learnt that inclusion is important because children are part of the community and they experience the impact of conflict directly. Children should not be left behind when it comes to peacebuilding”

– Abigail (girl, aged 11)



The Case for a Children, Peace, and Security Agenda

The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace, and Security and Re-Imagining New Communities are advocating for an urgent reframing on how children’s participation and protection in global peace and security are conceived of and understood. Recognizing that children are active participants in their worlds, there is a need to center the agency, perspectives, and participation of children as integral to disrupting cycles of violence and achieving sustainable peace and security.

“As both potential victims of and participants in armed conflict, children must meaningfully participate in peacebuilding. Therefore, any serious attempt to strengthen and advance the human rights and peacebuilding nexus will require the prioritization of the protection of the rights and participation of children”

– Shelly Whitman and Madeline Zutt, Why Canada Needs to Promote a Children, Peace, and Security Agenda

Despite the existence of a Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) mandate and a Violence Against Children (VAC) mandate at the United Nations, children currently lack an Agenda that seeks to prevent violations of their rights while promoting their active participation in building peace and security in our world.

Drawing on the concept of the child as a “citizen in waiting” (Barbara Arneil, 2002), and recognizing that even very young children are active participants in their communities, the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security and Re-Imagining New Communities are calling for the adoption of a Children, Peace, and Security agenda at the UN and for the perspectives of children to be heard and prioritized in peace and security agreements that directly impact them.

This excerpt was co-created by the Dallaire Institute and Re-Imagining New Communities. Re-Imagining New Communities participated in the *Global Conference on Advancing Children’s Roles in Peace Processes and the Vancouver Principles* as a practitioner organization grounded in community-level peacebuilding and child-led action. Through its Children Led Community Peace Labs (CLCP-Labs), the organization shared a tested model for safely engaging children as peace actors within schools, faith institutions, and community level.

We respectfully acknowledge the contributions of young peacebuilders - Meshack Otieno (aged 14), Juliet Ayiera (aged 17), Abigail Wairimu (aged 11), and Leshan Kwanzu (aged 13).

The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace, and Security is an international organization working to prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict and violence and to transform cycles of violence.

Re-Imagining New Communities is an award winning, inclusive and values-driven peacebuilding organization where every story, voice and child shape a peaceful tomorrow.





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



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