PROTECTING CHILDREN IN CONFLICT: ACHIEVING SDG 16.2 AMID GLOBAL CRISES – THE CASES OF UKRAINE AND GAZA[1]

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Abstract: The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of children, severely undermining efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.2, which seeks to end all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, and trafficking of children. This article provides a comprehensive examination of the risks children face in these war zones, including sexual violence, exploitation, recruitment by armed groups, forced displacement, family separation, starvation, physical injuries, psychological trauma, and death. Drawing upon recent quantitative data, it highlights the scale of these violations and underscores the urgency of robust legal, humanitarian, and policy interventions.

The article further analyses international legal frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Geneva Conventions, alongside humanitarian strategies such as child-friendly spaces, psychosocial support, and family reunification programs. By integrating child protection into peacebuilding, monitoring, and community-based initiatives, this study argues for a multifaceted and legally grounded approach to safeguarding children in conflict zones and advancing the realization of SDG 16.2.

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 seeks to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against children[2]. The ongoing armed conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza present profound challenges to the realization of this goal.

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[2] United Nations. (n.d.). Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions. (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/)

Children in these regions are disproportionately affected due to widespread displacement, the breakdown of governance structures, and the erosion of protective systems. This article examines the types, scale, and impacts of violations against children, reviews relevant legal frameworks, and proposes strategies to achieve SDG 16.2 in these contexts.

1.Understanding the Risks for Children in Conflict Zones

Children in conflict zones face a multitude of threats that endanger their physical, psychological, and social well-being: sexual violence and exploitation (vulnerable children, especially girls and those separated from families, face heightened risks of sexual abuse); recruitment by armed groups (children may be forcibly recruited to serve as combatants or used as human shields); forced displacement (many children are uprooted from their homes, leading to family separation and vulnerability to trafficking); loss or separation from parents (family networks, which often provide protection, are disrupted); starvation and malnutrition (conflict-induced food insecurity disproportionately affects children); physical injuries and death, consequent to exposure to bombardments, crossfire, and accidents resulting in high rates of injury and mortality; psychological trauma – the exposure to violence, displacement, and loss leads to lasting emotional and mental health issues with lifelong impact.

2. Quantitative Assessment of Child Protection Violations in Ukraine and Gaza

The scale of these risks can be measured through several indicators mentioned above. Considering sexual violence and exploitation, a 50% increase in sexual violence against children has been documented in Ukraine, since the onset

of the conflict, particularly affecting displaced girls[3]. In Gaza, the incidents of sexual exploitation have also increased especially among displaced children[4].

As to the risk of recruitment by armed groups, according to the New York Post, over 35.000 Ukrainian children have reportedly been taken to Russian-controlled facilities, subjected to re-education and potential militarization Ukraine[5] Although exact figures are unavailable, in Gaza, children also face risks of recruitment and use as human shields.

In Ukraine over five million individuals have been forcibly displaced, with thousands of children separated from their families[6]. In Gaza, nearly one million people have been displaced internally, with widespread separation of children from caregivers.

Contemplating starvation and physical injuries, according to UNICEF (2024), food supply disruptions have sharply increased child malnutrition, while over 2.600 schools were damaged or destroyed.[7] This scenario is even more disturbing in Gaza, where approximately 91% of the population faces acute food insecurity, with children being the most affected, many starving to death. "The number of malnourished children in the Gaza Strip is rising at an alarming rate, with 5,119 children between 6 months and 5 years of age admitted for treatment for acute malnutrition in May alone. According to data received from the UNICEF-supported nutrition centres across the Gaza Strip, this represents a nearly 50 per cent increase from the 3,444 children admitted in April 2025 and a 150 per

[3] https://www.savethechildren.net/news/sexual-violence-against-children-conflict-surges-50-5-years-worst-level-ever (22.10.25).
[4] https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/women-in-gaza-say-they-were-exploited-by-men-promising-food-money-in-exchange-for-sex (22.10.25).
[5] https://nypost.com/2025/09/16/world-news/kidnapped-ukrainian-children-taken-to-more-than-200-russian-facilities-for-re-education-study (22.10.25).
[6] https://www.unhcr.org/ua/sites/ua/files/legacy-pdf/ukraine_protection_analysis_update_-_july_2024-compressed.pdf (22.10.25).

[7]https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/media/49211/file/UNICEF_SitAn_Summary_2024_ENG.pdf.pdf. (22.10.25)

cent increase from February when a ceasefire was in effect and aid was entering the Gaza Strip in significant quantities. Of the 5,119 children admitted in May, 636 children have severe acute malnutrition (SAM), the most lethal form of malnutrition."[8]

Last, but not the least, as to psychological trauma and death, we may state that in Ukraine, children experience severe psychological distress and casualties among children are significant.[9] In Gaza, over 13.000 children were killed and many more suffer severe trauma.[10]

3. Legal and Policy Frameworks for Protection

International law provides a normative framework for child protection, the first of which is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This document states in its article 19 that "1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child." In other words, it affirms the right of children to be protected from all forms of abuse and exploitation.

Worthy of mention are also the Optional Protocols on Children in Armed Conflict – Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) prohibits recruitment and use of children in hostilities[11]–, and the Geneva

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[8] https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-5000-children-diagnosed-malnutrition-gaza-strip-may (22.10.25)

[9] https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/media/49211/file/UNICEF_SitAn_Summary_2024_ENG.pdf.pdf (22.10.25)

[10] AP News. (2025). Over 13,000 children killed in Gaza. https://apnews.com/article/a271b1724a7fef890ff912ce66e4668b (22.10.25)

[11] Article 1 of the Protocol: ""States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities.". Also article 2 prohibits compulsory recruitment of anyone under 18 into national armed forces and

Conventions and International Humanitarian Law. These last documents mandate the protection of civilians, including children, during armed conflicts.

In fact, The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977 together form the main legal framework that protects civilians (including children) in wartime. Geneva Convention IV (Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 1949), in article 3 (common to all four Geneva Conventions), prohibits violence to life and person, taking of hostages, humiliating treatment, and unfair trials of people not taking active part in hostilities; article 16 mandates that the wounded, sick, infirm, and expectant mothers be the object of particular protection and respect; article 24 provides that children under 15 who are orphaned or separated from their families must be cared for and protected; article 50 states that the Occupying Power must facilitate the proper working of institutions for the care and education of children, and finally article 132 requires that interned children be released first when hostilities cease.

The Additional Protocol I (1977) (International Armed Conflicts)'s article 48 establishes the principle of distinction – parties must always distinguish between civilians and combatants; article 51 provides general protection of the civilian population, prohibiting attacks on civilians and indiscriminate attacks, and article 77 provides special protection for children, stating that:

"Children shall be the object of special respect and shall be protected against any form of indecent assault. The Parties to the conflict shall provide them with the care and aid they require." The Additional Protocol II (1977) (Non-International Armed Conflicts) provides specific protection to children, including: "Children shall be provided with the care and aid they require," and prohibits their recruitment or participation in hostilities if under 15, in article 4(3).

article 4 prohibits non-state armed groups from recruiting or using children under 18 "under any circumstances.".

Unfortunately, we are compelled to recognize that this legal framework faces remarkable challenges in enforcement due to the ongoing hostilities, weak governance, and limited access for monitoring bodies.

At this point, we are drawn to the one-million-dollar question on this subject: what means are within the reach of the international community to promote the safeguard of these children? The answer could emerge from different areas, as we will now demonstrate.

4. Challenges to Achieving SDG 16.2 in Ukraine and Gaza

In theory, to achieve child protection in conflict zones, there are several key strategies to be implemented, including: child-friendly spaces (safe areas providing psychosocial support, education, and recreational activities); medical and nutritional assistance, consisting of treatment for injuries, mental health support, and food aid to counter malnutrition; family reunification programs; and community-based protection, which enhances the role of the local communities in monitoring, reporting, and safeguarding children. All these measures depend on the good-will of the parties in conflict, notably, Israel and Russia. It is common knowledge that humanitarian aid is denied, particularly in the Gaza strip. In Gaza, humanitarian access is frequently restricted, directly impeding delivery of protection services and thereby undermining the realization of SDG 16.2.

Furthermore, real-time monitoring systems remain inadequate. Effective implementation would require well-trained educators, healthcare workers, and social service providers capable of identifying and responding to child rights violations promptly.

Finally, integrating child protection into peacebuilding is essential. Sustainable protection must ensure that children's rights are embedded in peace negotiations, reconstruction efforts, and education reforms, restoring the education systems, rebuilding schools and curricula which were disrupted by the conflict, to provide stability, skill development and long-term resilience for war-

affected children. It is mandatory to promote these children's psychosocial rehabilitation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza demonstrate the complexity and scale of violations against children. Achieving SDG 16.2 is extremely difficult without the cooperation of the parties involved, due to the lack of enforcement of international law. It is compelling for the future to obtain a robust enforcement of international law to hold perpetrators accountable. This accountability will work as a means of prevention of future conflicts. It is also necessary to work on the expansion of humanitarian and protection measures to address immediate and long-term needs, the Integration of child protection in peacebuilding and reconstruction initiatives, and, last but not least, increase international cooperation and community engagement to safeguard children comprehensively.

Only through a multi-layered, data-informed, and legally grounded approach can the international community effectively protect children in conflict zones and progress toward SDG 16.2. Ultimately, the protection of children in conflict zones is not merely a humanitarian imperative but a legal obligation under international law and the true test of global commitment to sustainable peace.

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